

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE WOMEN OF WHALE ROCK

THE GULLS SWARMED OVER the Sandcastle Hotel. Whipping and diving and cawing to their fellows, they looked like something out of Daphne du Maurier's "The Birds," a novelette more sinister and terrifying than anything Hitchcock ever produced.

Charles watched from his deck. The morning breeze was harsh and smelled of salt. He still wore his silk pajamas. Rain the night before had left the wood damp and cold. His ancient tattered slippers, the ones Grace had given him before she died, were getting wet.

Grace and gulls. He closed his eyes, knowing what the night would bring. Then he shook off the thought, hoping, this time, he would have the resolve to let it end.

Charles opened his eyes and rested his hands on the damp rail. The swarming had grown worse. Nearly a hundred birds flocked to that tiny section of beach.

There was no way he would go down there.

At least, not alone.

He sighed, went inside, and called Dan Retsler.

Dan Retsler was scanning the Oregonian as he stood near the window of the police station. The window overlooked Highway 101, the main thoroughfare down the Oregon Coast. Every morning, Retsler scanned the newspaper and the street simultaneously. In the summer, he would be the primary witness to petty thefts, tourists running red lights, and the occasional fender-bender.

His police department had a staff of three, not counting the dispatcher. He put two officers on at night. During the day, he and a lone officer could handle the problems with the help of the dispatcher. The dispatcher, one Miss Lucy Wexel, had been with the department since Retsler was a teenage hoodlum at Taft High School. He doubted she was any different when she was hired than she was now. She chewed gum, talked tough, and believed her work safeguarded the mean streets of Whale Rock for yet another day.

The phone rang and she answered. Then she stabbed the hold button with a stubby finger, and paused to take a draw from her cigarette before facing him. Smoke curled around her face, making her look like someone's kindly grandmother instead of the hardest woman he had ever known.

"Charles Bishop," she said, and from her tone Retsler knew what the call was about.

He wound around the gun-metal desks to the small cubicle he called an office. Then he grabbed the receiver on the ancient black phone, and punched line one.

"Gulls?" he asked.

"Got another report, huh?" Bishop sounded vaguely relieved, as if a burden were being lifted from him.

"No," Retsler said. "Lucky guess."

He rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger, trying to ease a building headache. He knew the drill: first the gulls, then the body pecked beyond recognition, and finally the county coroner, who would claim death by drowning and deny everything else.

"Where should I meet you?" Bishop asked.

"At the turnout," Retsler said. He'd long ago stopped demanding that Bishop stay home. Bishop would do as he pleased. For some reason, he always chose to join Retsler in shooing the gulls away.

And then holding watch over the ruined mass of flesh until the coroner arrived to lie to them again.

The first one showed up just after Bishop arrived in town. He had called Retsler and begun their tradition. A young woman, somewhere between sixteen and twenty-six (judging by the age and condition of her remaining internal organs), washed up on the beach. The gulls swarmed. The tourists were terrified, and someone started a rumor that she had jumped from the Sandcastle's roof, desolate about a love affair gone bad.

Only no one knew her, and no one was reported missing.

Definitely not a suicide, the coroner, Hamilton Denne, had said as he knelt gingerly beside the body, getting his expensive gray slacks covered with sand. But he couldn't rule out death by drowning. He couldn't confirm it either since her lungs were missing, her chest cavity ravaged, and her face gone.

He could say for certain that she had died, and that she had spent a long time in the water.

He would say nothing more. Not even when Retsler asked about her dental records. Her lower jaw remained intact, and some of her teeth had fillings. Not enough to identify her, but enough to cause Bishop consternation. He was a newly retired dentist, and he said, with a single glance, that no one used that odd mixture of iron and silver fillings anymore. No one had since the thirties.

A week later, a second body turned up. A boy, between ten and eighteen, dead against the sea wall.

Then the stories emerged, stories about why the Sandcastle had closed in the early seventies. Guests reported strangers in their rooms, a strange briny smell in the hallway, and frightening attacks in the middle of the night. Soon the hotel stood empty, even in the busy summer. The owners tried to sell the hotel, failed, and closed the doors. Lucy heard that they had discovered another body inside the day they boarded it up, but no one had any record of it.

And so the curse of the Sandcastle began.

But locals did not discuss it, except for Retsler and Bishop. Retsler because he had to deal with the bodies, and Bishop because of guilt.

Because of his wife.

Charles stood in the gravel turnout near the beach access. He wore his waterproof jacket and a pair of knitted gloves, the last pair Grace had made for him. The other gloves were in his bedroom closet, frayed reminders of her and the lack of her. He had his back to the path, hands shoved in his pockets, the wind off the ocean wiping his remaining hair into his face. The traffic on 101 was Saturday heavy, but so far no one had stopped to see what was drawing the gulls.

They were still diving for the body. Their caws sounded like screams up close, a woman's scream, desperate and alone.

He shivered in spite of himself.

At last Retsler's blue sedan pulled into the turnout, spraying gravel like shotgun pellets. Dan Retsler was forty, but drove as if he were eighteen and immortal. Charles often wondered how Retsler managed to pick up speeders without feeling like a hypocrite.

Retsler got out, wearing his green cop's rain slicker and waders. In his right hand, he clutched the bullhorn. In his left, a rifle. He handed Charles the bullhorn, then dug in the car a moment longer, emerging with a bag of popcorn big enough to feed a family of five.

"Where's Eddie?" Charles asked.

"The Billows. He knows what to do."

They all did. They had done it often enough.

Charles hefted the bullhorn, turned it on its side, made sure the speaker was off, and turned the control to "siren." Retsler loaded his rifle, but kept the safety on. The bag of popcorn leaned against his leg like a small child.

"Ready?" he asked.

Charles nodded. They turned together and stared at the gulls, circling and crying, white perfection against an azure sky. The ocean smelled strongly of brine, but the wind had died.

Retsler led the way across the narrow footpath and down the concrete steps. The previous night's storm had churned up the beach, leaving piles of sea-blackened driftwood and gifts of garbage from the sea-bottom. The tide was out, but the sand was still wet, attesting to the power of the storm. Sea foam dried in a reflective green pattern across the flat part of the beach.

No one walked here except summer people. Locals avoided this stretch of beach, making excuses about the rocks, the driftwood, the soft sand. Sometimes Charles walked down the steps, sitting on the bottom one and staring at the remains of Whale Rock, the one that gave the town its name. It no longer looked like a whale as it had at the turn of the century; now it looked like a parking lot in the middle of the sea. Even the strength of rock succumbed to the power of the ocean.

The gulls formed a sea of their own near the Sandcastle's deteriorating wall. The sight was formidable, not frightening something none of the stories about birds -- not even Du Maurier's classic -- managed to capture. Charles stood on a flat rock protruding from the sand and clutched the bullhorn. Retsler stood beside him, popcorn in one hand, rifle in the other.

"Here goes nothing" Charles said. He picked up the bullhorn and flicked it on. The siren wailed like amplified feedback. He cringed, wishing he had remembered ear plugs. Retsler hadn't moved. He stared intently at the gulls.

They took a few hesitant steps, then the first flew into the sky, followed by another, then another, until the entire flock was airborne. They soared, their screeches hidden by the bullhorn's wail.

This was where Eddie came in. He was supposed to toss bread from the Billows's deck. Sometimes he caught the birds' attention; sometimes he didn't.

This time he did. They flew in ever widening circles north, crying their protest at the siren, and communicating the message to other gulls about food ahead. They left this isolated section of beach torn up and covered with droppings, feathers, bits of food.

And the body, one leg bent as if the person were just resting on its back, watching the clouds.

Neither Charles nor Retsler left the rock. They had done that too early once, and he still had nightmares about it.

Of all the creatures on God's earth, birds seemed to be the only ones without souls.

Finally the last gull disappeared behind the bluff that hid the Billows. Charles

shut off the bullhorn. The sound stopped, but his ears ached, and would, probably, until the following day. But if things ran true to form, he wouldn't notice.

He shuddered, wished, just once, that this would all end.

Then Retsler inclined his head toward the body, and Charles nodded.

Together they stepped off the rock and headed down the beach.

RETSLER CLUTCHED the bag tightly. The rifle was heavy in his right hand. He hoped he wouldn't have to use either. The last time had convinced him that the gulls weren't afraid of the gun, and the time before that he discovered that a single bag of popcorn barely gave him time enough to escape. The extra large bag might give them a few extra seconds, which they would need. Bishop didn't run well anymore. Retsler always worried about bringing him to the beach.

But if they didn't go together, Bishop might have come alone, a risk that Retsler just couldn't take.

The fetid odor of decaying flesh mixed with the scent of salt. This one had been out here longer than the others. Odd that the gulls would prey on it now.

He led the way across the rocks and onto the soft sand. The body was shoved against the sea wall like all the others, one leg bent in a V, arms outflung above the head. Retsler knew without looking that the eyes would be gone. The gulls always took those first, some kind of avian delicacy, followed by the tongue if they could get it, and then they would peck their way into the stomach. He had seen it more than once, not just here, but on bodies washed up all over the beach.

Retsler followed the three-pronged bird prints to the corpse's side. He set down the popcorn, reached in his pocket for the Vicks, and smeared some inside his nose. Without looking, he handed the bottle over his shoulder to Bishop. No one needed to smell this, not even for a moment.

Bishop took the bottle but stayed back. Retsler crouched near the body, tried to see what it had been through the mess the gulls had made.

Male, older, judging by the strands of gray mixed with the wet curls on top of the head, corpse white and bloated. It had been in the water a long, long time. Maybe it wasn't one of the bodies that came to this beach. Maybe it was a true death by drowning, not some mystery killing offshore.

Then he saw what he hoped he wouldn't; the remains of a vest with a gold watch still tucked inside, pants with buttons, not zippers, and on the bent leg, garters to hold up the socks. Old man clothing pre-1950.

He glanced at Bishop, who pointed at the open mouth. Tobacco-stained teeth, cracked, crooked, and broken. No modern dentist would allow such a travesty.

Bishop set down the bullhorn. "I'll call the coroner," he said.

That night, they got drunk. Bishop tried to beg off, but Retsler, afraid he'd go home and brood, convinced him to brood in public. They went to the False Colors, a local bar that had once started as a tourist attraction. But the pirate theme seemed more foreboding than touristy, and tourists usually spent an uncomfortable hour before sliding their way out the door. Retsler usually liked the black and white skull-and-crossbones hanging over the door, the uneven wooden floor, the skulls lining the fireplace mantel, the sound of sea chanties sung with unusual heartiness through the stereo speakers.

Usually. On this night it seemed a bit much.

But Lucy had picked the place. She was drinking whiskey and smoking a cigar, her unpainted chair tilted back against the stones in the fireplace. Eddie was nursing his third beer, and Bishop was downing gin and tonics as if he actually liked the stuff. Retsler had just bummed one of Lucy's cigars when the coroner walked in.

Hamilton Denne never set foot in a bar. He occasionally frequented establishments where fine liquor was served. He lived in Glen Ellyn Cove, a gated community for Whale Rock's considerable wealthy population. The Cove had a five-star restaurant near its gate, a private club upstairs, and an atmosphere as snooty as Denne's name. Most of Denne's neighbors had no idea what he did for a living. If they asked, he always told them that he was a medical examiner. He worked hard to keep his name out of the papers, easy to do since the coroner's position in Scary County was an appointed, not an elected, position. If it was necessary to mention the coroner at all, the paper usually did it by title, not by name. No sense in offending the Dennes of Glen Ellyn Cove.

Denne ordered a Glenlivet and was tersely informed he would get Chivas or the bar scotch or no scotch at all. He settled for the Chivas, and carried it to the table himself.

Retsler said nothing. He was on his second local stout and his judgment was impaired, but not that impaired. Eddie peered over his long-neck as if he didn't believe what he saw. Bishop slid his gin and tonic toward the center of the table, unfinished. Lucy set her chair down on all four legs, leaned forward, and said, "Want a cigar, Your Highness?"

"No, thanks," Denne said, and pulled out a silver cigarette case engraved with his initials, no doubt a gift from his obscenely wealthy wife. Being the coroner, Retsler believed, was Denne's secret rebellion against that elegant woman whose bank account had bought Denne all the good things in life. Denne removed a cigarette, tapped the end, then twirled it in his long, clean fingers.

He looked at all of them as if he saw what their breathalyzer results would be. Then he put the cigarette in his mouth, lit it with a matching silver lighter, and took a long drag. "I wasn't here," he said, smoke billowing out with each

word. "Not now, not ever. You ever claim I was or breathe a word about what I'm about to say, I'll deny it. Is that clear?"

Lucy tilted her chair back. Bishop stared blearily at the table. Eddie lifted his long-neck in mock toast, then cradled it against his chest.

"I'm sure no one would believe us anyway," Retsler said.

"I'm sure you're right." Denne took another drag, the gesture curiously defiant, like a teenage boy smoking in front of his parents. "Some coroners aren't very thorough, you know."

Retsler knew. He and Denne had come on at the same time and had to clean up similar messes. They had commiserated about it more than once over lunch -- in North County, away from Denne's snobby friends.

"But for those who are, the human cadaver is a wealth of information."

"So you going to dick with us or tell us what you found?" Eddie said.

Retsler shushed him. He knew Denne. Denne would talk in his own time.

"Take, for instance, someone who drowned. Easy call, from the general condition of the body to water in the lungs. Most coroners would leave it there. Some would do a routine check for other fluids, and some would test the water in the lungs."

Bishop had picked up his drink. He clutched it in one hand, knuckles white.

"If the water's salt, possible accidental death by drowning. But if the water's fresh --"

"He had his lungs?" Retsler asked.

"Regrettably no," Denne said. "And if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. The fish had gotten to him before the gulls."

"So he'd been there a long time?" Bishop asked.

Denne didn't answer. He took a sip of the scotch, winced, and pushed the glass aside. "In 1936, a yacht went down near the Rock."

"The Lady June," Lucy said. "Quite a scandal."

Retsler peered at her, doing a slow calculation in his head. She had been six at the time. It was hard to imagine her as a six-year-old.

"Right," Denne said. "You know about it?"

"They don't," Lucy said.

Denne nodded, resumed as if he hadn't been interrupted at all. "It had been a clear night. She'd gone out of the bay with a complement of fifty, all there to celebrate the engagement of June Brooks to Lester Dyston. June, the darling daughter of J. William Brooks of the Portland Brookses --"

"The lumber baron's family," Lucy added helpfully.

"-- was eighteen and quite a catch. Dyston was a Midwestern transplant who held some sort of managerial position at Brooks Lumber. Thirty of Portland's best families were invited to the celebration. Many declined because the party was being held in Whale Rock in May, and most weren't ready to open their beach houses just yet."

"Lucky most of them did, too," Lucy said, "or it would have been Portland's version of the Titanic."

This time, Denne glared at her. She shrugged, stuck the cigar back in her mouth, and crossed her arms, as if she thought he'd get the story all wrong.

"The ship went down in the middle of a storm. Only Dyston survived. He claimed he was carried to shore by mermaids." Denne glanced at Lucy, who didn't even blink.

"And people believed him?" Eddie said.

Denne smiled. "Maybe not about the mermaids. But he was young, he was strong, and he was a good swimmer. Whale Rock isn't so very far away when the tide is out."

"So what does this have to do with our bodies?" Bishop asked.

"A couple of things." Denne stubbed out his half-finished cigarette, grabbed his glass, and downed the scotch like water. The taste apparently didn't matter to him anymore. "First, the Sandcastle was built from the old Brooks mansion. Second, neither the yacht nor the bodies were ever recovered, and third, we have in the cooler the body of J. William himself."

Retsler felt a lightness in his stomach that had nothing to do with the beer. "You're sure?"

"As sure as I'll ever be," Denne said. "This one came complete with identification. The watch was engraved, so was his wedding ring."

"That's not enough," Retsler said.

"You're right. J. William's habits were legendary, from his love of a good cigar to his adoration of spicy food. He nearly lost his right leg in World War One, and from then on, that leg was shorter than the other. His ulcer operation made medical history at the time."



"You studied a lot about this man," Retsler said.

"I had cause." Denne let the words hang, but Retsler knew why. The bodies had been bothering Denne too, only he had some idea where they had come from. He had been waiting for definitive proof. And apparently he had found it.

"What convinced you this was Brooks?" Bishop asked.

"The leg might have done it," Denne said. "But it was the ulcer scar. The surgeon stitched the stomach closed, then stitched the skin incision separately. He removed the external stitches but not the internal ones. That was bad enough, but I could have chalked it up to carelessness. No. But that wasn't it. It was the stitches themselves. No one uses wire for sutures these days. No one has for a long, long time."

"You're saying all the bodies came from that ship?" Bishop asked. Denne nodded.

"So what, they all return on the anniversary of the sinking?" Eddie asked.

"Nothing as romantic as all that," Denne said. "The storm last night stirred the ocean. That ship must have gone down deep, some place cold enough to keep bodies from decaying, to keep clothing intact."

"And the ocean spits them back up, in the same place?" Eddie asked. "I don't think so."

"Oh, I do," Denne said. "A certain kind of tide must bring them out of that place. Something that happens during storms, maybe, or the storms' interaction with what's left of the Rock. Every now and then the conditions are right, and the sea returns a body."

"I suppose you believe in mermaids too," Bishop said. His words were slightly slurred, his tone odd, almost hopeful.

Denne shook his head. "I agree with the local police chief. Dyston sabotaged the yacht, killing everyone on board except himself."

"How would the chief know that?" Retsler asked.

"Because the lifeboat made it to shore, rope cut, boat empty. Because all the lifesavers made it too, also empty. Because a passing fishing boat saw the boy jump over the side while the party was in full swing. It looked to them like the yacht was in trouble but no one seemed to be noticing."

"Little vague, I think," Retsler said.

"No more vague than mermaids," Denne said.

"You've been holding out on me," Retsler said.

"Maybe." Denne stood, and put a twenty on the table. "Or maybe I made this up to justify my presence in this sleazy little bar. Goodnight all."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and picked his way carefully around the wooden tables. None of the other patrons even seemed to notice him.

"He couldn't have made it all up," Eddie said, looking at Lucy. "You knew about it."

Lucy nodded. "My mom kept all the clippings."

"So why'd he kill them?" Eddie asked.

"Because he was a drifter," she said. "Because he was marrying June for her money."

"Seems to me you don't kill the golden goose," Retsler said.

"You do when Daddy reveals your secrets at what should have been your night of triumph, when he humiliates you in front of what must have seemed like the whole world."

Retsler shook his head. "Sounds to me more like June had cause to kill Dyston."

Lucy grinned. "Don't look at me. I'm just telling you what the papers said. Me, I've always believed in the mermaids."

"They're not saints either," Bishop said, and passed out.

CHARLES WOKE UP in his own bed, cold and fully clothed. His mouth tasted of cotton, and his head ached. He had gotten drunk, and he had vowed not to. The sound of running water in the master bath made him sit up, hand to head, trying not to moan. At first he thought the toilet was running, but the sound was too bathtub-like, too full.

Someone else was in the house. Visions of Daryl Hannah in *Splash*, himself as an aging Tom Hanks, made him realize that he was watching too many videos, substituting books and movies for human companionship.

His life had enough drama.

Of course someone else was in the house. Someone had brought him home.

Besides, it couldn't be mermaids. They rarely came into his house. He only knew of them doing so once. The night Grace died.

Still, as he stumbled to the bathroom, he couldn't shake the image of them as he last saw them, looking not lanky and graceful, not the semi-naked beauties of Disney animation or with the erotic suggestiveness of Yeats. Instead they

reminded him of ancient figureheads carved by inexperienced sailors, women with eyes that were flat, features rough-hewn, hair plastered to misshapen heads. Their land legs had feet as big as flippers. The mermaids walked as if they were in pain -- Hans Christian Andersen had gotten that much right -- but that could have been as easily caused by the huge feet as "daggers through the flesh."

So when he entered the bathroom, he was startled to find it empty. The tub was dry, and the toilet wasn't running at all. Not even the faucet in the sink was dripping. But he hadn't dreamed the sound. It continued in the plumbing like a garrulous ghost.

He went down the stairs to the guest bathroom and found it empty too. The kitchen was as spotless as he had left it, and the washer was off. No water running anywhere in the house.

Then he looked outside. Down the hill from him, the sea glowed with its strange luminosity. A few clouds blew across the moon, but there was no rain.

No water anywhere. Except in his imagination. With the mermaids.

Not even Dan Retsler had enough guts to go to the Sandcastle at night. But after he dropped off Bishop's fireman-carried him, actually, upstairs and into bed -- he stopped at the bottom of Bishop's hill and stared at the hotel.

The moon was full and the ocean shone, as it always did at night, as if someone had lit it up from underneath. The natural light, combined with the street lights, made the west side of Highway 101 as bright as dawn, when the shadows were just receding from the land, replaced by the whitewash of early morning.

The Sandcastle didn't look like a mansion. But it didn't look like a hotel, either. It was three stories high, rectangular, and had doors every ten feet that faced the highway. The balconies were made of metal, which were beginning to look red from rust. The rest of the building was a bright peeling blue. Someone had added fake turrets on either side --if he hadn't known better, he would have guessed they were cardboard --and the word "Sandcastle" was painted across one of them in white gothic script.

What kind of man would build a mansion like that? What kind of heirs would sell it? Beachfront property was rare on the Oregon Coast, rare and expensive, while the rest of the land was cheap. He couldn't imagine what that land would have gone for in 1936, or why, despite the bodies, it still hadn't sold in 1997.

The turrets, he imagined, were an addition, as were the balconies and the doors, added in the tourist-boom of the 1950s. He couldn't, for the life of him, see the original shape of the building, how all the pieces had once fit together into an elegant whole.

He wasn't certain why that was important, but he would wager Denne had an idea. Denne, with his stories about tides and deep cold and bodies remaining preserved for sixty years. Denne, who clearly believed none of it.

Laughter broke his reverie. Women's laughter. Three women surrounded his car. Tall women, with strawlike hair, and the ugliest faces he had ever seen. They had bulging eyes, naturally pursed lips, and nearly flat noses. Fish women, he thought, and shuddered. He'd had too much to drink. They leaned on his hood, peered into his windshield and laughed at him. Their gray-green eyes were the color of the sea on stormy mornings, their skin the same sallow bloodless white of the corpses he'd found on the beach.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, get away from the car!"

But they didn't. They moved closer, like people peering into a fish tank. He slapped at the windshield, and when they still didn't move, he punched the horn, quick and loud.

The women jumped away, startled. The one on the hood rolled off, unable to catch herself. Her friends disappeared in front of the car, then reappeared in his headlights clutching her and staring at him as if he were more than a curiosity, as if he were a threat.

He tapped the horn one more time, and they backed away from the front of the car. He turned north on 101, hands shaking, mouth dry. It wasn't until he had reached the movie theater a mile away that the realization hit him.

The women hadn't just been ugly.

They had also been naked.

CHARLES WOKE after a restless night's sleep, filled with dreams of running water and bloated, decaying bodies. His head pounded, and his stomach churned. The sour taste of gin and tonics coated his tongue.

He sat up, one hand to his head, wondering why he'd let Retsler talk him into going to the False Colors. He knew better than to drink. When he drank, he forgot, and when he forgot...

He threw the covers back and stood up, startled at the sudden chill on his legs. His silk pajama bottoms were missing. His upper thighs were coated with sand, and a strand of seaweed was wrapped around his left knee. He got out of bed quickly, his heart pounding. Maybe he and Retsler had gone down to the beach after they left the bar. Maybe he had put on his pajama top and had forgotten his bottoms. Maybe, but not likely.

The house smelled of brine.

And he thought of Grace, feeling that same sickly stab of guilt he always felt when he thought of her. She had remained trim into her mid-fifties. Silver hair capping her well-shaped head. Every morning she went down to the beach, the entire beach, legends be damned.

Every morning.

Including the last.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, restraining an anguish so deep he had no words for it. He should have known. He should have known yesterday when the body appeared on the beach. He should have known he would awaken like this.

He had known, and he had ignored it, preferring the company of friends to the silence of the house. Knowing that only drink would get rid of the images in his mind.

Maybe he had allowed himself to get drunk. Because he didn't have the willpower to say no.

"I'm sorry, Grace," he whispered. "Sorry for everything."

But sorry would never ever be enough.

"Okay," Lucy said. "This is what I got."

She dumped three scrapbooks with black construction paper and cardboard covers on Retsler's desk. The smell of stale cigar smoke and mildew rose from them. He pushed his copy of the Oregonian aside. No newspaper this morning, no surveying the street. These deaths were bothering him, Denne's comments bothering him even more.

And the three women from the night before, they too had haunted him during his pitifully short sleep. He had awakened annoyed, his body aching, as though he had been interrupted in the middle of an erotic dream. Only he hadn't found the women attractive, nor the dream in the least way sexual.

"Dan," Lucy said. "You gonna look or should I take these away?"

Her voice snapped him out of his reverie. He wasn't a teenager anymore. He really needed a full night's sleep.

"No," he said. "No, I'm going to look." He smiled at her, and took the notebooks. He was wrong about the material on the covers. It wasn't a cardboard and construction paper combination but something that felt like both of them and neither at the same time. The scrapbooks were bound with a thick gold string.

"Well, don't rip nothing," Lucy said. She picked up his newspaper and went back to her desk.

He opened the first notebook carefully. The front page of the local weekly, the News Guard, from 1936 flapped at him. The paper was brittle and was held in place by tape so yellow it nearly looked brown. Beneath the page, in small black script, someone had written: Accident at Whale Rock.

At first, he didn't read the articles. He merely scanned them, thumbing his way through the entire notebook. When he reached the end, he realized that this was more than a curiosity to Lucy. She had been six when the accident happened. Someone else had kept the notebooks and passed them on to Lucy in later years.

He almost asked her whose notebooks they had been. Almost. He wasn't ready to hear. He needed to study the clippings first.

The first notebook held only clippings from the News Guard. The second notebook held clippings from papers as diverse as The Oregonian and The New York Times. The death of J. William and his friends sent a ripple through the national financial community, a ripple that became evident almost immediately. J. William was an old-time fiscal conservative, with ties all over the Northwest. He had fought the bids for dams on the Columbia. He had fought the arrival of federal money into Oregon. He had lost the battles twice, but during the spring of 1936, he was working against Roosevelt, against the New Dealers, and against the flow of federal money. If he hadn't died, if he hadn't lost, the Pacific Northwest would have looked completely different. No public funds would have supported the Bonneville Power Administration. No defense contracts would have flowed to Seattle.

The money would have stayed with J. William Brooks and his friends.

The national papers called the destruction of the yacht murder. And some papers claimed that Lester Dyston was part of a larger conspiracy. The conspiracy of the New Dealers to rid themselves of the conservative Northwest factions, the friends of I. William Brook. The papers claimed the trial, its mockery of justice, and its result proved the conspiracy, but nothing was ever done about it.

None of those facts made it to the News Guard. The local paper focused solely on the issue of mermaids.

Charles took a long hot shower. Steam rose around him as he washed off the sand. He had hidden the seaweed in toilet paper and flushed it, never wanting to look at it again.

Then, when he was done, he wrapped himself in a big fluffy towel and stepped out of the stall, pausing for a moment at the tiny bathroom window with its view of the sea.

The morning ocean was multicolored: the front section a steely blue, the middle a solid gray, and the section near the horizon golden where the sun broke through the clouds. Gulls sat on the roof of the Sandcastle as they always did, but none dove, none circled, none flocked.

He swallowed and leaned his head against the cool glass, cursing the day he had bought the house. The day after he and Grace had moved in, they had showered together, then stood before this window, marveling at their luck. That afternoon, they had walked to the beach and he had found a bottle with a half

torn label that read Chateau Lafite-Rothschild 1924, covered with seaweed and still chilled from its days in the ocean. Pulling it out of the sand had reminded him, even then, of that scene in Notorious where Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant watched as Claude Rains poured uranium dust from a wine bottle. Grace had wanted to leave the bottle, but Charles had not. He had taken it, thanked the ocean for her gift, and brought it to the house. They had wine with their fresh halibut dinner that night. Grace had taken one sip and declared the wine vinegar, but he believed her palate was off. It was, quite simply, the best wine he had ever tasted, and he drank the entire bottle himself.

That night, after Grace fell asleep, he had wandered drunkenly down to the beach. He had later told her he had blundered into the surf, and she had scolded him for his carelessness, made him promise to never do so again, afraid he would die from exposure or drowning or his own drunken stupidity.

But he had lied to her. He had not touched the water. His memory, his dreams, were of a song as fine as the wine, the ocean singing, he had thought, and he had followed that sound to the Sandcastle, to the beach. The Sandcastle had been lit from the inside, and he followed the lights through the open doorway into a polished oak hallway and a magnificent staircase covered with a red carpet. A mirror covered the wall on the first landing, and he saw himself as he thought of himself, a slim middling handsome man in his early twenties, looking young and bewildered in the soft light. He wore a tuxedo of a type he had never had in real life, complete with spats, tails, and a top hat. The outfit gave him a dignity he had never had before.

The music carried him upstairs into the open door of a darkened bedroom. As he stepped inside, a woman with cool hands touched his face, removed his hat, and he thought, started to undress him, until he realized that the hands below belonged to another woman. The second woman unbuttoned his fly and took him in her mouth. Her lips and tongue were cool and refreshing, and he was instantly more aroused than he had ever been in his life.

The first woman undressed him, not allowing him to participate, and when he was naked, she guided him to the bed. The second woman continued her fellatio, and as they eased him onto the velvet spread, he felt the presence of a third woman.

He was getting hard remembering. He groaned and pulled away from the window, hand on the wall to steady himself. His memory of that night was of mouths all over him, cool mouths, caressing him like rain. And when he came -- and he did come, in powerful pulsing spasms, more powerful than anything he had experienced before -- it felt as if his essence were flowing outward and joining a vast ocean of sensation, like a river flowing into the sea.

The next morning he had awakened in his own bed, covered with seaweed and sand and tiny bite marks that looked like the circles left by octopus suckers.

He knew that the circle marks would be on him this morning, but he hadn't looked. He couldn't face it, just like he couldn't face any memory of the experience the night before. He had touched the women only once, and had felt

hair like straw and skin like scales. From that moment on, he had let them do to him whatever they wanted, allowing his hands to be held captive while they marked him with their mouths. The experience was never as erotic as the first time. The first time he had thought it all a drunken dream and later when he realized it was real and he was being unfaithful to Grace, his mind rebelled and his body was unable to stop.

Then, after Grace died, he had stopped drinking, and the women had stopped visiting. Except for last night. Except for last night, and a handful of sloppy self-pitying nights when the loneliness was so bad that a touch, any touch, even their touch was preferable to none.

His penis throbbed. He glanced down at it, poking out from the towel. Red circles flared against the hardened skin. Red circles the size of a dime.

His stomach spasmed and he swallowed, barely able to keep the contents down. He grabbed himself and began masturbating, letting the memory of the night return, knowing that this was the only way to rid himself of it, and of the self-loathing that came with it, the self-loathing that grew worse each time.

Each time Grace's killers summoned him, and he went, valuing the ecstasy they gave him more than life itself.

Retsler rested his chin on his hands, staring at the two-page spread from the News Guard in December of 1937. Dyston's trial had been held in Newport, and it had drawn people from all over the world. The grainy, poorly reproduced photographs made the tiny courthouse look as if it were under siege: a Simpson-esque circus long before O.J. Simpson was even born.

The paper dutifully reported the case until the day Dyston testified. And then the paper had reprinted the testimony, using ellipses and editorial comments in brackets as it cut out sections it deemed unworthy for a family newspaper.

Retsler couldn't believe what he was reading. If it hadn't been on the same yellowing newsprint, if the same brittle tape weren't holding the pages in place, he would have thought Lucy was playing a trick on him. Even then he wasn't entirely sure. "Luce!" he shouted.

She set down her cigar and stood with a dignity foreign to her. She had been listening to the pages turn, waiting for just this moment. And somehow that thought unnerved him.

She came inside his office and closed the door. They were the only two in the building. Closing the door seemed unnecessary.

"He testified about the mermaids?" he asked, his tone deliberately ironic.

"You're reading the transcript," she said. Her expression was guarded, her voice flat. She used this tone with dumb tourists -- "tourons," she called them. Tourist-morons.



"Tuxedos? A gift of wine from the sea? Destroying his one true lover He was delusional."

"He was telling the truth," she said.

"He was nuts. He should never have been allowed to testify," Retsler said. He closed the notebook. "No wonder the national press was so angry that he was acquitted. He should have at least been institutionalized. I don't know how a jury could have let him off."

"They were a jury of his peers," she said softly.

She was serious, more serious than he'd ever seen her. She believed this too, although he didn't know why. A small shiver ran down his back, raising goosebumps on his flesh. And for an instant, those naked women flashed through his mind, their mouths pressed against his windshield. Their tongues had a suction cup on the tip, leaving small dime-shaped impressions on the glass.

"That's nonsense," he said, as much to her as to himself.

She took the notebooks and hugged them to her chest. She studied him, the reserve gone. "Have you taken any gifts from the sea?" she asked.

"Only the bodies," he said.

"Those aren't gifts," she said. "They're warnings."

"Of what?"

She shook her head, more serious than he had ever seen her. "I wish I knew."

AFTER HIS SECOND SHOWER of the day and a meager meal of tea and dry toast, Charles made his way down the rickety steps into his wine cellar. He wasn't feeling well: dizzy, hung over, and angry at himself for being weak yet again. He couldn't believe that Grace would forgive him if she knew -- his sins had gone long past forgiveness. All he could hope for now was that death was truly an oblivion, and not that all-knowing, all-seeing place some religions made it out to be.

A cobweb brushed against his face as he stepped onto the thin carpet. The cellar was cooler than the rest of the house and smelled faintly damp, the effects of living on the coast. Bottles of wine shone in the light from a single bulb. He and Grace had built up this collection, and he hadn't touched it since she died.

But he still knew where the bottle was. He had kept it, a compulsion he had, like all the others since he'd come here. Compulsions he hadn't tried to deny.

He didn't know why he was trying now. Perhaps there truly was, as some people said, a last straw. And perhaps it was tiny, a small thing unmeasurable by real

world standards.

Perhaps.

Or perhaps he had been planning this since the first time he knew the women were real, and he had finally gained enough courage.

Or perhaps he finally realized he had nothing to lose.

He rounded the corner, and grabbed the bottle from its bin. The bottle was made of thick glass. The torn label was still there -- funny that neither he nor Grace had commented on that, considering how long they had thought the bottle had been in the water -- and the bottle felt full, even though he knew he had polished it off on his own. He had saved it as a memento, thinking somehow that the bottle alone would be worth money, not knowing, instead, it would cost him his soul.

He clutched the bottle to his chest and headed out of the wine cellar. He would grab his coat and go to the beach.

To the Sandcastle.

Alone.

The Glen Ellyn Lodge stood atop a cliff face overlooking the ocean. Behind the lodge was one of the most spectacular private golf courses in the nation, and beside the fairways stood the homes of Whale Rock's rich.

Retsler hated going there. He thought the fact that it was a gated community appropriate to its attitudes, its snob appeal, its closedmindedness.

But he parked in the lot reserved for guests and went inside the seventy-year-old structure, knowing he would find Denne in its dining room, surrounded by Whale Rock's elite, and staring down at the ocean.

The lodge was decorated like an English country manor, in dark woods, with hunting greens and browns on the carpet and upholstery. A fire burned in the stone fireplace, and from the dining room came the sound of soft voices and the clink of glasses. The maitre d', a man Retsler had gone to high school with, raised a single eyebrow.

"Business," Retsler said, and slipped by. He turned the corner and stepped into what he considered to be the most spectacular room on the Oregon Coast.

The greens and browns continued in here, but they were nearly invisible compared to the view. The architect had let the ocean speak for itself. The walls were made of paneled glass, with only the water and the sky visible on all three sides. It felt as if a person was outside, without the wind and the chill and the hint of spray rising from the surf below.

Denne sat alone at a corner table, cigarette in one hand, glasses on the end of his nose, peering at the Wall Street Journal. Retsler crossed the room, ignoring the other patrons who surreptitiously watched him, and sat across from Denne.

"You knew about the mermaids, didn't you?" Retsler asked.

Denne folded his paper, removed his glasses and set the cigarette in a cut glass ashtray. "Hello, Dan," he said as if Retsler hadn't spoken. "Would you like a cocktail? Or perhaps a bit of lunch?"

"Mermaids," Retsler said. He was exhausted and not in the mood to be civil.

"Of course I knew about them," Denne said. "I told you about them when I told you about the Lady June." He had lowered his voice and leaned forward as he spoke.

"You knew about Dyston's testimony? About the idea that mythical creatures trashed the entire yacht in order to have him to themselves, to get rid of the competition?"

"I find it amazing the man was not committed," Denne said. He picked up his cigarette. "Now, if you're not going to have lunch, then let me get back to my paper."

Retsler put his hand on the paper, pushing it flat. "Lucy says other locals have seen the mermaids."

"You're local. Have you?" Denne asked.

The three women surrounding his car rose in his mind. He swallowed.

Denne's small, superior smile faded. His face drained of color. "Have you?" he whispered.

"I saw three strange women last night. I had just poured Charles home. They were at the base of the hill."

"On land."

Retsler nodded.

"And did you hear anything odd or unusual?"

"No," Retsler said.

Denne let out a small sigh.

"You believe Dyston's story, don't you?"

Denne gazed out the window. The sea crashed and boomed against the rocks below,

the sound loud over the hushed voices around them. "My father talked of them," he said softly. "After my mother died. He killed himself, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

Denne's smile was small, tight. "It wasn't a surprise. He drank too much, blamed himself for her death. He sent me away, made me promise never to come back."

"But you did."

"Of course."

"And you believe in the mermaids?"

Denne took a deep breath, and met Retsler's gaze. "I don't go to the beach alone. Neither does my wife. And on nights when the moon is full, I sleep with the windows closed, with earplugs in both ears, and the stereo on."

Retsler frowned. "Because of mermaids?"

"Because of the mermaids," he said.

In the daylight, the Sandcastle looked like a gothic ruin. Its blue paint was peeling, and the fake facades were crumbling. Vandals had broken through the plywood over the windows, revealing the wide staircase from Charles's dream/vision. The carpet was rotted, the mirrors smashed, and the stairs rotted through. He shivered just looking at it.

Charles clutched the bottle to his chest, and made his way to the hotel's beach access. High tides had broken the stone steps, and the metal rail added decades ago had rusted through. He went down the steps gingerly, one hand on the stone wall for balance.

The sea was loud here, louder than anywhere else on the coast. He remembered remarking on that to Grace the night they had come down, the night they had found the bottle. He had noticed it again when he found her body almost a year later.

He knew why they had taken her. Just the night before he had spoken to them, told them he had someone else, someone he loved, and that he wanted them to leave him alone. He had left, thinking he was safe. The next morning, the gulls had circled, and he had found Grace's body, lying in a tidal pool near the edge of the Sandcastle Hotel. Denne had ruled it accidental, death by drowning, and there was nothing to prove otherwise.

Nothing except Charles's feeling, nothing except the mermaids' sense of triumph each time they encircled him and made him theirs.

The wind was cool and damp. It carried small grains of sand that pelted him as he stepped out of the protection of the stairwell. This section of beach was

completely deserted. Not even a gull sat at the water's edge. The sand was thin, revealing the thick black lava rock beneath. Only the ocean seemed alive, booming and cascading along the rocks with more energy than he had ever had.

He used to think of the ocean as a vast desert. It always made him marvel at the ancient sailors' ability to navigate such a broad and empty expanse. He had wondered, early in his enchantment, how the mermaids did the same. He doubted they used stars, and he wondered about the consistency of the ocean bottom. It wasn't until he realized that the bodies turned up on shore the very day the mermaids would summon him that he knew what happened.

The mermaids lived near the Sandcastle, and when they wanted his attention, they used the bodies as a calling card.

There was no calling card today. Only him, the ocean, and the broad expanse of sky. He scrambled onto the rocks, his feet slipping on the wet sand. The bottle grew heavy in his arms. He had to get close to the water. He was not as strong as he used to be. With his right hand, he grabbed the bottle by its neck and picked a spot farther out, a spot where the ocean was almost black, and threw with all his strength.

The bottle spun in the air, its brown sides catching the light, winking at him. He wished, at this moment, that he could see in black and white. This part of his life needed to be like a noir film, all darkness and shadows, with the light shimmering high and out of reach.

Then the bottle hit the water and disappeared into the darkness. He waited a moment, to see if it would surface, and it did not. A relief so profound it was almost sexual ran through him. He let out a sigh, turned and scabbled along the rocks.

The ocean boomed behind him, and a thin wave, nearly gone, wrapped itself around his shoes. Hands gripped him from behind, scaly hands, clawlike hands, and hair coarse as straw blew across his face. Now he knew why he'd been thinking of death all day, why he had made this choice at this moment.

He had never had enough courage to do things on his own. He had always needed help.

He turned, and for the first time ever, returned the mermaids' embrace.

AS RETSLER DROVE back to Whale Rock, he couldn't shake a feeling of unease. Denne's words kept circling through his mind. Mermaids and fear. Too many people taking such a preposterous thing so seriously.

He needed to talk to Bishop, to see why he had mentioned them the night before.

But as Retsler crested the rise near the Sandcastle, he saw gulls. Hundreds of them, swarming, filling the blue-gray sky. The Sandcastle was nearly blanketed with them, and with all the falling feathers, the neighborhood looked as if it

were buried in snow.

He picked up the radio. "Lute," he said. "Any call from Bishop?"

"No," she said. "Should there have been?"

"We have gulls at the Sandcastle. Send Eddie down, would you?"

"And the coroner?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. "I'll let you know."

He clipped the receiver back onto the radio and drove into the turnout. His blue Taurus slid on the gravel before stopping. He had been driving too fast. As usual.

He got out, heart pounding. He wasn't used to being alone on this stretch of highway. The gulls were thick. He wasn't sure he'd be able to get down to the beach without Eddie's help.

Retsler reached into the back seat and removed his bullhorn. He hadn't brought the rifle. All he had was his service revolver. He promised himself he wouldn't get too close.

He walked along the narrow footpath and down the stairs. The gulls covered the beach like a blanket -- too many for him to approach. But he didn't need to. The corpse was leaning against the rock retaining wall, body intact except for the missing eyes. A single gull stood on the corpse's wet hair, but the others kept their distance, as if showing Retsler the kill.

The kill.

His friend.

Charles Bishop. Clearly and irrevocably dead.

Retsler felt bile rise in his throat, and he swallowed, keeping control as best he could. He had taken Bishop home the night before, he knew he had. Besides, Bishop was dressed differently.

Bishop had come down here, alone, for no apparent reason at all.

Retsler backed away, never taking his gaze off the birds. One false move and they would swarm him too.

It wasn't until he reached the narrow footpath that he started to run.

That night, Lucy forced him to go to the False Colors. She was afraid he would go home and brood. He didn't know how brooding in public was any different from brooding alone, so he went along. He sat in a dark corner of the bar, listening

to Lucy chatter about the day's silliest events. Eddie nursed a long-neck and listened as well.

It felt as if they had lost one of their own.

Retsler couldn't get Bishop's body from his mind, the mocking position it had been left in. Just as his wife's had been.

And the last thing Bishop said before he passed out at this very bar the night before. He was talking about mermaids. He'd sounded wistful. As if he knew.

"Dan?" Lucy's voice was soft, as if she'd been trying to reach him more than once. "We can talk about Charles if you like."

He didn't like. He took a sip from the local stout and shook his head. There was nothing he could do. He'd stood beside Denne during the autopsy, saw all the evidence. Bishop had drowned. Just like his wife had. Denne ruled it accidental death, but he said he could have ruled suicide just as easily.

There was nothing Retsler could do, and that galled him even more.

He drained his third pint of stout and stood, a bit more unsteadily than he had thought he would.

"Dan?" Lucy asked.

"Going home," he said.

"I'll drive you."

He shook his head. She'd had more to drink than he had. "I'll walk."

He grabbed his windbreaker and swung it over his shoulders, then went out the bar's back door. The night was clear, the stars dabbed across the heavens like spots of white in black velvet canvas. The cool salty air refreshed him just enough, and he followed the footpath down to the beach.

The False Colors was nearly four miles away from the Sandcastle, and his home was between them both. He'd walked the beach home numerous times without a twinge. But this time, when he reached the deep brown sand farthest from the ocean, his heart did a double-flip.

The salty freshness had changed. There was another smell here, a bitter, biting scent that he associated with death. His stomach flipped again and he winced. Tonight he would have to find another way home.

He turned, and his boot hit something hard in the sand. He peered down, expecting a rock, and seeing instead a bottle filled with liquid.

"Damn tourists," he said, and swept it up, realizing as his fingers touched it

that the bottle was old and still damp from the sea. Its label was torn in half, and in the light from the beachfront hotels he could just parse out some French words, and a date: 1924.

Wine, old and expensive. He grinned. He would give it to Denne. Denne liked expensive things.

Retsler tucked the bottle under his arm, and had already reached the footpath, when the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He removed the bottle once more, and looked at it, heart pounding.

An expensive bottle of wine. Bottled before 1936. When the Lady June went down. This was another gift from the sea. A benign one, perhaps, but still a gift from a tragedy best laid to rest.

Besides, how did a wet bottle appear in dry sand? Tourists, he thought again.

Or mermaids.

And what if they existed? What if, after he took their gift, he could hear their song? And what if it lured him, like it had lured Dyston? He had no girlfriend to drown. But he had friends. So many friends.

God, he was drunk. He would never have believed these thoughts sober. He staggered back down the path until he reached the sand. He slogged through it, reaching the water's edge. A black spot the size of a child's wading pool proved a perfect target. He raised the bottle and threw it into the darkness.

The bottle landed in the inky spot with a splash. Concentric circles flared outward. A cool breeze touched him, and for a moment he felt suddenly sober. Too sober. Then the surface of the water smoothed, and his mouth went dry.

A woman rose out of the darkness. She had bulging eyes and a flat nose. Her long wet hair flowed along her neck and shoulders like seaweed. She clutched the bottle against her large breasts.

All the light from the area seemed focused on her. Her white skin seemed even whiter against the dark backdrop of the sky and sea.

When she saw him, she smiled. The smile was benign, almost questioning. She held out the bottle, as if he hadn't understood the invitation.

He shook his head. He had seen the results of gifts from the sea and he wanted no part of it. But he was so aroused his body hurt. How did that happen? He thought she was the ugliest woman he had ever seen.

"No," he said. "No. Thank you, but no."

Her smile faded. She sank beneath the water as if she had never been. With her went his arousal, and in place of it, he felt a vague unease in the pit of his



stomach.

A wind whipped up. Waves the size of trees formed at the inky spot and headed toward shore. He backed away, never taking his gaze from the ocean, until his feet hit the footpath. Then he started to run.

Gulls dive-bombed him, cawing as they swooped near his face. He covered his eyes, and bowed his head, peering through his fingers as he negotiated the path. Things brushed his hair, and droppings fell all over him. He let one hand fall to his side, slid the other arm across his eyes, and reached for his service revolver. He grabbed it and shot skyward, the bang startlingly loud.

The cawing stopped. The rustle of wings disappeared. He sat abruptly and watched as fifty gulls flew heavenward, their white feathers the color of stars. He had never seen a gull at night before. A chill ran down his spine, and he remembered some movie he had seen as a kid, a Hitchcock movie about birds going out of control, attacking for no reason. It had terrified him, that movie, because those birds seemed like real birds, their behavior as cold and inexplicable as the sea.

The gulls were gone. He was alone, covered in bird droppings and feathers, and feeling shaky.

He had refused. He had refused the gift from the sea. And the birds, the woman, they had been angry at him, but they hadn't hurt him.

They hadn't touched him.

He had survived the curse, something Dyston hadn't been able to do. Something, Retsler suspected, his friend Bishop hadn't been able to do either.

"God, Bishop," he whispered, "if you'd only talked about it."

But Retsler wouldn't have believed Bishop if Bishop had told him. Retsler wouldn't have believed unless confronted with it himself.

Mermaids did hunt along the beach.

And they were as natural as birds, plucking eyeballs from the dead?