

# The Girl from a Thousand Fathoms

David Gullen

# Midnight

CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT a mermaid came ashore at the bustling resort town of Brighton on the south coast of England. Swimming strongly, she entered the half-mile of water between the town's two piers. The one to the east blazed with light, life, and fairground music. The other was a storm-battered and fire-wracked skeleton of bare girders, the post-apocalyptic roost for a thousand starlings.

Drifting on a lazy swell she listened to the surf push and suck at the shingle beach. The waters of the English Channel were cold but they lacked the chill of the distant Atlantic swells, and their wild dangers.

Weary from her days-long swim she coasted under the ruined west pier and looked up past the limpet-encrusted legs into clear night sky. She had made it, she had escaped and now she was free. A pang of intense sadness welled inside her. She was alone, but she was free.

Light from a quarter moon glinted on her bare skin as she knelt at the waterline. She hesitated and touched the shell-crusted purse on the kelp-string tied around her waist. It contained everything she possessed: her comb, a handful of pearls, a handful of octagonal gold coins.

No turning back. She reached across the collapsing wavelets and placed her hand palm down on the shingle beach. Her body formed a conduit between the elements of sea and land. She felt their power, the eternal tension. She spoke the shoreline words her mother taught her long ago:

*This child of oceans is not changing sides,  
Not abandoning one for the other.  
I know my origin, gifts, and graces.*

*Land and sea, you agreed  
We may cross your war grounds  
In our own times of need.*

*I know, I am asking for a strange thing.  
I do not expect you to understand  
Now, let me walk as a child of the land.*

The waters behind her flattened and the wind died. The mermaid shivered. Neither of these were calm things, they were the stillness of sudden attention, of great strength held in check.

Out of the flat water six heavy waves rolled towards the shore one by one. As they broke they pushed up the shingle into a platform of sea-built land. At the same time an angry wind came off the shore, tore spindrift from the wave tops and flung it away into the night.

This far, the wind said. This far, and no further.

No turning back. With her heart in her mouth the mermaid hauled herself onto the shingle mound.

A seventh wave came. Power thrummed up from the water through the skeleton of the old pier. A thousand starlings shrieked up into the night air as the sea surged forwards.

The wave roared across the platform and lifted the mermaid up. A staggering wind shoved back. The wave could not break. The mermaid hung inside the water behind a glassy salt-water wall, her long fair hair fanned about her.

Wind-snatched shingle flew off the beach, land hurled into the sea. Each stone slammed into the wave-wall and carved bubble-streaked trails deep into the water.

*Her but not you, the land told the sea.*

*This far and no further.*

*You and your tricks.*

The sea briefly held, but water like wind cannot stay still for long. The land-wind whirled and roared and shoved. The wave burst apart in spume and spray and crashed down to nothing.

Salt spray swirled, the wind died. A shimmering mist settled to reveal a barefoot woman dressed in a sky-blue blouse, a knee-length green skirt, a matching jacket. A pair of flat shoes lay at her feet beside a small shoulder bag. Strange things, she would get used to them.

Her own purse was already starting to dry and crack. She emptied the contents into the new one and saw the front was decorated with a cat face in silver sequins.

The Elements had kept their word, but the Land had a dry sense of humour and the Sea's was rather salty. Only later did it occur to her that the image was a warning.

She picked up the shoes and crossed the shared ground, the littoral that turn and turn about was land then sea. Further up the slope of the beach a scattered row of dried seaweed, scruffy feathers and frayed rope formed a ragged and wavy tide-line. She took a deep breath and stepped across.

Dry land.

Bright sounds from the other pier ebbed and surged on the night wind, the air tinged with the aromas of chip oil, candy floss, curry and beer.

Those gangs of mermen could not reach her here. Her old life was gone and along with it her old name. One night she had surfaced behind a South American cargo tramp. High on the stern was the ship's name, below it the country of registration. She liked what she saw and took it for herself. Now, for the first time in her life, she felt safe. She could fit in here. She must.

Up on the boardwalk she slipped on her shoes and climbed the wide concrete steps to the King's Road. She crossed the deserted neon-lit street and entered the winding lanes of Brighton town.

Some yards behind her a rather beautiful cat dropped soundlessly out of the shadows. Tail held high it trotted after her.

# The Truth

THE SIGHT of Tim Wassiter's second ever client made him think that becoming a private investigator was one of his better moves.

She was young and she was beautiful. She walked straight through the door and spoke in a rich New England contralto. 'Mr Wassiter, my name is Dolores Vogler. I'm a marine biologist and I really need your help.'

Dolores wore her straight black hair cut to the line of her jaw. Her dress was the same carmine red as her shoes, low-cut and close-fit, the frilled hem just below her knees. On her head was a pillbox hat with a short veil of open black net and she held a red leather clutch bag in her hand. She stood on his worn old carpet like a rose in a rusty bucket. A worried rose in need of Tim's help.

These are clothes nobody wears any more, thought the part of Tim's mind that was still able to think. Especially not at half past two on a dull afternoon in the run-down office of Brighton's newest and most alternative private investigator.

You're being played, keep it cool.

Tim walked round his desk and gestured to one of his chairs. 'Please sit down. How may I help you?'

The cuffs of Tim's flower-patterned shirt were fastened by silver skull cuff-links, his black jeans were last year's, his shoes had seen better days. He needed a haircut.

Dolores Vogler took in his appearance with a single sweep of her eyes. She sat down and crossed her legs. One shoe

dangled from her toes, her legs were bare. 'I need to find a missing automobile,' she purred.

'No problem. What sort of car, Ms Vogler?'

'A 1934 Airflow Chrysler Imperial Eight. Black, with Finnish plates.' She looked Tim straight in the eye. 'It's my husband's car.'

There it was.

Tim played it straight. 'Have you reported it to the police?'

'Of course, but we all know how busy they are.' She smiled and stood up. 'It's his favourite vehicle. He doesn't know it's missing yet and I'd love to be able to return it before he notices.'

He took out his notebook. 'Where did it go missing?'

Dolores moved to the edge of his desk and sat there with one long leg swinging as she trailed a red fingernail back and forth under the edge. Her skirt rode up. She watched Tim through her veil. 'Oh, in Brighton.'

'And when was that?'

'A few days ago.'

'Do you know the registration?'

'I can't remember.'

And there it was again.

Dolores extracted a tight roll of bank notes from her clutch bag and placed it on Tim's desk. She looked worried. 'I have to go now. Please find my husband's car quickly, Mr Wassiter.'

'A few more questions, Ms Vogler—'

She turned at the door, her red dress stretched flat across her shapely pelvis. Her smile was full of promise and brilliant perfect teeth. 'I really would be ever so grateful.'

Tim listened to Dolores' light footsteps on the stairs. As soon as he heard the door open and close he snatched up the money and went to the window. Down in the street, shoulders slung back, Dolores stalked towards a Mercedes S-class drophead, cream with white leather interior. An athletic

brunette wearing long white boots and a short leather dress stood beside it with one foot on the chrome-trimmed running board. A platinum blonde sat behind the wheel.

Tim loosened his collar. Dolores Vogler was no more married than he was. What sort of a man had three mistresses and a car like that?

Dolores' floral perfume lingered in the air. As the surface notes faded a cloying undertone grew, syrup-sweet like over-ripe fruit. Tim opened the window. It was too strong, too definite, as if it were there to cover something up. Something rotten.

Down in the street the S-class sank down on its rear springs and surged away. He watched the car until it turned the corner. None of this was right and it wasn't real. Dolores had lied and Tim strongly suspected she did not care that he knew. Yet if that was the case why the distraction of the clothes and the coquetry? Unless that in itself was a double deception, a false diversion never intended to work, implying a deeper layer of chicanery.

It was far simpler to believe Dolores Vogler's wealth allowed her to behave like that all the time. Unless—

He could either speculate himself into a paranoid headache or just take the case and find out. One thing was certain, this sort of thing had never happened when he had been in uniform. Right now, right in front of him, was a cash up front case. In all probability it was a risky one, possibly even dangerous. He checked the money roll—a thousand pounds—and revised that to 'probably'. He didn't care, he couldn't afford to. A nagging voice said he should have written Dolores a receipt. He pushed it aside, finding a missing car wasn't difficult, cops did it all the time. This was his case and he was going to solve it.

Tim was still looking out of the window when he heard the slow stamp and clump of Mrs Woosenkraft's wide-fit court



shoes on the bare wood of the stairs. He pushed the money roll into his pocket and went to the door and called down.

‘Hello Mrs W. How are you today?’

‘*Prynhamn da*<sup>1</sup>, Tim. Not so bad.’

Mrs Woosencraft was short, dumpy and stronger than she looked. Sometimes her corona of fine white hair was dyed pale pink, today it was powder blue. Her skirts were floral, her inevitable shawls hand-made.

A round metal tray covered by a kitchen towel sagged alarmingly in Mrs Woosencraft’s hand. ‘I’ve made you some Welsh cakes. They’re still warm, too.’

Tim quickly took the tray before the cakes slid off. ‘I’ll put the kettle on.’

Mrs Woosencraft lived at number twenty-three in the middle of a Victorian terrace of seven houses further down the street. She often popped in on some little excuse or other. Tim didn’t mind. She was lonely and it wasn’t as if he had much else to do. At least, not until today.

Tim poured the tea, a mug for him, a bone china cup and saucer decorated with daffodils and violets for Mrs Woosencraft. He had bought it from one of the antique shops in the bustling Brighton Lanes.

Tim took one of the golden brown flat cakes and ate half the soft buttery thing in one bite. He nodded in appreciation. ‘These are very tasty.’

‘Not bad at all, though I say it who shouldn’t.’ Mrs Woosencraft’s head came up, she sniffed the air and looked at the open window. ‘As I came down the street I couldn’t help but notice a lovely old car with three well-dressed young ladies in it. Such a pleasure to see such smartness, there are too many jeans and t-shirts these days. Call me old-fashioned but a nice girl shouldn’t wear trousers. It’s not proper.’

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<sup>1</sup> *Good afternoon.*

Tim was certain Dolores Vogler would not fit into Mrs Woosencraft's definitions of 'nice' or 'proper' but he enjoyed listening to her lilting South-Wales accent. He liked her enough that he didn't mind her gentle nosiness or old-fashioned opinions. The cakes were good too.

'They were customers, Mrs W. Marine scientists.'

Mrs Woosencraft made no response. Tim raised his voice. 'I said they were customers. I've got a job.'

The wrinkles round Mrs Woosencraft's mouth deepened. 'Another job, is it? How lovely,' she said without any sign of pleasure. For a moment she sat very still. Then she reached out, her cup rattling in the saucer. 'Top that up for me, will you?'

Hurriedly Tim took her cup and poured more tea.

'Tell me, Tim. Has your Morse come back to you yet?'

'Not yet, Mrs W. At least the chickens are happier.'

Tim's cat Morse was mostly Turkish Van, white-bodied with ginger brow, ears, and tail. He was a friendly and capable cat and still occasionally kittenish after ten years. He'd been missing for weeks. Tim had looked and looked and missed him like hell.

'Cats are so vulnerable in the streets.'

'Morse isn't a vulnerable cat.' Tim said the word 'vulnerable' deliberately, hoping Mrs Woosencraft would say it again, in the way only little old ladies from Carmarthen could.

'Too many cats are disappearing.'

That was true. Tim ate another cake and waited for Mrs Woosencraft's inevitable question.

'Well, now you have a proper job I expect you'll have no time to look for my poor Un Deg Naw.'

It was true, he didn't need reminding. Work was work and he really needed it. 'I'll make time to look for your cat.' It wasn't entirely a lie. He felt a little glum. 'Mine too.'

Mrs Woosencraft gripped Tim's hand in her papery, arthritic fingers. 'She's Bengalese.'

'You told me before, remember?'

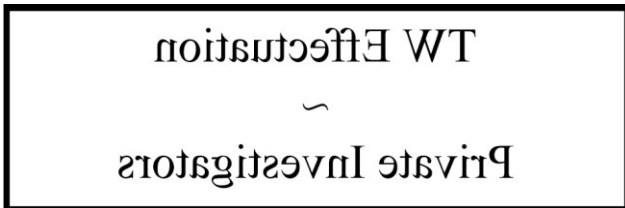
'Of course I remember,' she said sharply. 'I'm not daft, just worried. I know I've a lot of the blessed creatures. Too many some people say, just a mad old Welsh lady with nineteen cats, they say that too.' She held up her hand. 'No, I know they do. Too many for a little place in the middle of Brighton, but listen—I'm all alone and I need them all.' Her eyes grew watery, her smile brave. 'Every single one.'

Right that moment Tim thought she too looked a little vulnerable. Brighton was not always a friendly town.

'Little wretch that Un Deg Naw. Ruined my curtains climbing onto the pelmet. The Siamese copied her.' She tugged a hanky from the cuff of her cardigan and dabbed her eyes. A faint smell of lavender filled the air. 'She should be grateful I want her back at all.'

Mrs Woosencraft drank half her tea and announced she had to go. 'It will take me a while to get back on these legs. Finish the cakes, *bachgen*. I'll see myself out.'

Once again the office was empty. Tim looked at the gold lettering on the door:



He squeezed the roll of notes with intense satisfaction. That's me, Tim Wassiter. And I have my first real case.

About time too, another part of him said.

Build it and they will come, the first part replied.

He'd used the severance money from the police to rent and equip his office. Furniture comprised a second-hand desk and two chairs, and a sagging settee nobody sat in. An ancient computer occupied the desk, the desk sat on a carpet just the right side of threadbare.

A second door opened onto a short corridor to his bedroom, shower and galley kitchen. The corridor ended at the bottom of a narrow staircase to the roof.

The Vogler case had come just in time. In just a few more weeks the cupboard would have been bare and he'd have to accept the standard casework of a PI: divorce, petty fraud and office theft, family intrigues. He'd turned cases like those down as he waited for the right kind to turn up. The kind of case where he could prove his theories of alternative detection.

Now he could afford to pay some bills and have some flyers printed. In the future lay expansion, larger premises, junior investigators, an efficient middle-aged secretary. Beyond that, perhaps, the Tim Wassiter Academy of Alternative Investigation.

Tim came back to earth in his shabby office. Before any of that, the case itself. He took out his notebook and wrote on a clean page:

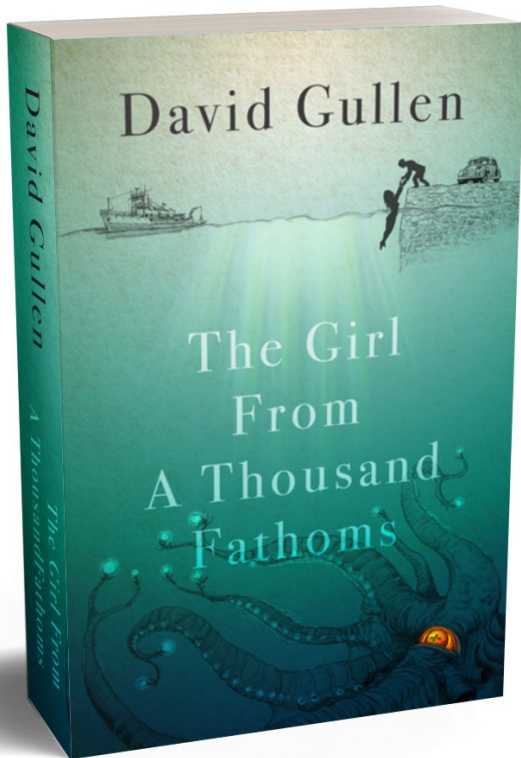
The Vogler Case:

Dolores Vogler is a liar.

She's beautiful, stylish and probably very rich.

She's still a liar.

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