



**P. A.
BROWN**

memory
of
DARKNESS

A NOVEL

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

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PRAISE FOR MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“In this latest glimpse of L.A.’s dark underbelly, P. A. Brown puts one very chilly hand on your shoulder while poking you in the ribs with the other. (What you do with your hands is up to you.) L.A.’s lost, lonely, and well-nigh unredeemable may find themselves stuck here in Brown’s sultry, sexy *Memory of Darkness*, but at least they’re not without a sense of humor.”

—Jeffrey Round
Author of *Death In Key West* and *The P-Town Murders*

“I just finished *Memory of Darkness* and really enjoyed it. Very colorful characters and I loved the father/son dynamic. I would definitely read more about them.”

—Rick R. Reed
Author of *Orientation* and *M4M*

ALSO BY P. A. BROWN

The Bear
Lynx Woods

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

BY

P. A. BROWN

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MEMORY OF DARKNESS
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To Ann Hoyt, who urged me to finish this

CHAPTER 1

I prowled behind the barrier separating the *turistas* from the action on Santa Monica Boulevard as the Christopher Street West Gay Pride parade marched by. I was feeling pumped and ready for some hot action. I'd already been cruised by half a dozen guys who definitely fit into my hunk category, but I was looking for something special today. After all, I'd just suffered the indignity of my forty-second birthday. Proof that I was over the hump. A milestone I could have done without.

Well I was here to prove I wasn't. Too old, that is.

Then I saw him.

He might have been twenty-one, but since I didn't plan on taking him into any bars, I didn't have to card him. He'd stripped off his T-shirt, and his muscled chest gleamed in the afternoon sun

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

with a wet sheen. He was clean-shaven without a stray hair anywhere on his hard, bangin' body. A short shock of hair made him a natural blond, but there was only one way to prove that beyond a reasonable doubt. I'd have to see the goods myself. He had an ass to die for, and he sure didn't mind showing it off. He wore a pair of skintight cutoffs that hugged his bubble butt and outlined his bulging cock and a fine set of balls I suddenly ached to taste. I could even make out the thin line of the cock ring he wore. My own prick rose to press against my Levis as I imagined driving it up that dark channel and hearing him squeal.

Our eyes met, and there was enough electricity there to power DWP.

I pushed through a quartet of leather men gathered in the Mobil gas station, who were ruining the whole leather mystique by talking about last night's Lakers' game with the kind of enthusiasm my grandmother shows for her knitting. They opened to let me through, but not without a few glares that warmed my heart. The smell of gasoline mingled with a dozen competing fragrances from hundreds of hot male bodies.

"Faggots," I muttered before I actually squeaked by them and found myself standing in front of perfection.

He eyed me with a practiced gaze, and I grew harder. Grinning, he slipped his hand between my legs, squeezing my already aching balls.

He licked his lips. "Nice package."

I put my arm around his shoulder and bent to shove my tongue into his ear. He shivered. "Got a name, tiger?" I asked, nuzzling his neck. "Mine's Wager."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Bunny."

I drew back and looked down at him. "Bunny? What kind of

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

name is that?"

"It's a long story. Maybe I'll tell you later, but right now I got other needs." He grabbed my hand and cupped my fingers around his pulsing cock. I was happy to squeeze. "You got a place we can go?"

I did. Eager to take charge, I wrapped my fingers through his and pulled him along. "Come on."

We were jostled as we made are way through the sea of spectators. I've been to past Gay Pride events in Weho, but this one had to be the biggest yet.

We passed a Los Angeles County Sheriff's department booth where they were actively recruiting. That was a hell of a change from past years when the only contact the sheriffs had with the gay community was with their saps.

We passed the booth. Half a block down Santa Monica Boulevard, I spotted a familiar face. What the hell did Markie call him? Preacher? Had he ever told me his real name? A cop of the old school. He always put on the facade of tolerance, but under it I suspected he belonged more to those club-wielding bullyboys from Gates' LAPD days. Not that he ever gave anything away in front of me. He was the model of political correctness personified.

He spotted me, and his craggy, time-hewn face took on the look I was all too familiar with. It's a creepy look, eyes like sharks, never blinking, never wavering. Full of malicious glee at what he planned to do to next. "John," he said. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Ditto," I said. I parked Bunny behind me, keeping a tight grip on his hand. No telling how he'd react being this close to a cop, and I wasn't about to lose this primo player.

Preacher looked down at our entwined hands. I thought I saw

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

his lips twist.

“Still the same old Johnny,” he said.

“Some things are just meant to be.” I took in his leather jacket and black linen pants. “What are you doing down here?”

“Keeping an eye on things.”

Typical cop response. Ambiguous as hell. “Well, see you around. Say hi to Markie for me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Sure.”

I dragged Bunny away, and twenty minutes later we climbed into my maroon, eighty-six Monte Carlo. I threw the car into gear and headed east. Only then did I dig through my Eastpak and find the E I had picked up earlier. He took the proffered hit and, to show his appreciation, wormed his fingers past the snaps of my fly and pulled out my fat seven inches. He ducked down and slathered my cock with spit.

“Not so fast, cowboy.” I pulled him away after nearly running up on a curb and taking out a little old lady and her Peekapoo. “Cool your jets. We got plenty of time when we get where we’re goin’.”

He licked his wet, plump lips, which did nothing to tame my boner.

I left him grooving in the car to Tiesto while I made arrangements at the front desk. The rooms at Summerside were nothing to write home about, but for a hot-sheets motel, they kept them reasonably clean, and it was cheap. I guided Bunny up the steps to the second-floor landing. He waited patiently while I fumbled the door open. I didn’t bother turning on the lights. There usually wasn’t much to see in these places, so why throw light on it?

He popped off his boots and socks before I even shut the door.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

His chest was sculptured marble even in the dim light, and I felt a corresponding jump in my cock. I set down my Eastpak on the only chair the room boasted and pulled out my bracelets. His eyes grew wide when he saw the cuffs.

“Want to play a game?” I asked huskily. “Do as you’re told, and I’ll be real good to you. There’s a twenty in it for you.”

He licked his lips again and dropped his gaze to my thickened crotch. “And what if I’m not good?”

“Then I’ll be really bad.”

Shaking, he stripped off the rest of his clothes and lay on the bed, his knees bent and his fist closed over his fat cock. I’d been right. He was a natural blond. Wispy curls of pale hair circled his prick and lightly covered the wrinkled sack below it. My own hard-on ached at the sight.

I slapped away his hand. That was mine. “Turn over,” I ordered.

He hesitated only long enough to earn another slap from me, then did as he was told. It only took me a couple heartbeats to secure him to the headboard. I undressed, then went back to raid the Eastpak a second time.

He looked sideways at me when I approached the bed, his eyes fastened on my bobbing cock. He again flicked his tongue over his lips and smiled.

I knelt on the bed and slid my boner down his throat. The guy had a talented mouth. Within minutes he nearly had me blowing my load. I pulled out. I traced the outline of his swollen mouth with my leaking dick, then backed away when he tried to take me in a second time. He looked at me with glazed eyes. His own erection was swollen, pressing against his cock ring and the nubby blanket under him.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Not so fast, kid.”

I propped my iPod on the bedside table. The Foo Fighters were playing “Best of You.” Talk about righteous.

Bunny jumped and clenched his ass when I shoved my fingers up inside him. He humped my hand, leg muscles bunching like wire cables.

“I got something a lot bigger than that for you.” I skimmed a condom over my leaking prick and slathered it with lube. He squirmed against my stiff fingers when I greased his fine ass.

I climbed onto the bed behind him and got an eyeful of his waiting hole. Easing in the head of my cock, I held his hips in an iron grip as I continued to slide inside him. Tight and hot. He groaned as I pushed my not-inconsiderable piece of meat all the way up his backside. I was breathing pretty hard myself. I licked the sweaty skin behind his ear and whispered, “Hang on tight. I’m gonna ride you till you squeal.”

I had my eyes closed, grooving on the moment, which is why I didn’t see anything until they burst through the door, into the room. I jerked away from the frenzied body in my arms and got a brief glimpse of two men wearing ski masks and gloves before one of them swung what felt like a tree trunk upside my head and sent me tumbling down into darkness. Dimly, I thought I heard someone screaming. Then there was nothing.

My head pounded. Pain played a savage tattoo inside my skull as I rolled onto my side. At first I couldn’t tell if I was crashing from the E or something more sinister. My face pressed against something rough. As consciousness returned in slow, painful increments, I grew aware I lay on the floor. The carpet under me smelled old and musty, like stale vomit. The other smells hit me then.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Metal. Blood. Shit.

I climbed awkwardly to my knees and gaped at the bed, not comprehending what I saw for a heartbeat or two. Memory flooded back. Memories of fucking Bunny's delectable ass. Memories... Someone had broken into my room. What the fuck?

Someone had raided my Eastpak and had shoved my fattest butt plug up Bunny's once-sweet ass. My massive black dildo had been rammed down his throat. They hadn't been gentle when they did it. Blood pooled on the ratty bedspread under him.

His throat had been sliced open. The bed was bathed in blood, as were the walls over his nearly decapitated head. The stench of clotting blood and evacuated bowels filled my nose and coated the back of my mouth. Nausea welled, and the two beers I'd had earlier at Gay Pride threatened to come back up.

Outside, the rising wail of police sirens grew closer.

The sirens snapped me out of it. My clothes were everywhere. I hadn't been paying attention to anything but fucking Bunny's luscious ass, and I wasted precious seconds finding my jeans and the T-shirt that were now splashed with blood, like a fun-house, tie-dye job. I considered waiting for Five-Oh, to give them my side of the story, but got real. How likely were the cops to believe me that two complete strangers broke into my motel room and did this? I was a two-time loser in the California penal system. Third time and I'd be doing life—if they didn't put a needle in my arm and save everybody the trouble. I didn't have time to pack my bag. I had to leave it.

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MEMORY OF DARKNESS

slipped, and I nearly took a header, catching myself on the iron railing, which wobbled under my frantic grip. I hit the ground running.

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I slammed the Monte Carlo into gear and bolted out of the parking lot.

Tires squealed as I roared over to Fountain Avenue, then onto La Cienega Boulevard, racing through the lights at Santa Monica. I forced my foot off the gas when I noticed several pedestrians turning to watch me. Last thing I wanted was to leave a trail of witnesses.

I glanced at the radio clock. Three-oh-five. It was maybe ten minutes since I'd fumbled awake to find Bunny's corpse. The cops would be all over the motel by now. How long would it take them to break JJ, the front desk clerk? I never registered under my own name, but JJ knew me well enough. Better not count on much time. Even if he didn't think I had anything to do with Bunny's death, he wasn't going to put himself between me and the local brown shirts.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I briefly thought of turning myself in, telling the cops what I found. Right. I have such a good rapport with the West Hollywood Sheriff's Department. They'll believe me when I tell them I had nothing to do with Bunny's death. It's all a bad coincidence that he was wearing my cuffs and that my butt plug was shoved up his ass. Let's not even think about my dildo. Hell, if it were me, I'd think I was guilty.

I knew who to call. I fumbled in my pocket for my cell phone and speed-dialed the number.

"Deputy Sheriff Mark Wager, West Hollywood Division."

When I opened my mouth nothing emerged.

"Who is this?" Mark's voice took on the rough edge I knew very well. "If that's you, Robin, then talk. Don't fucking joke around with me."

No idea who Robin was. Mark went through women like an allergy sufferer went through Kleenex. I almost failed to see Romaine Avenue. Again my tires squealed as I barely missed slamming into a Hummer that was way out of its normal territory. An ancient boomer who would have looked right at home in a Beverly Hills' proctologist's office raised an arthritic finger at me.

"Who is this?" Mark roared into my ear, his flimsy patience vanishing.

Snapped back to the moment, I ground my teeth. "Markie, it's me."

"Jesus, don't fucking call me that," Mark said.

I closed my eyes at the all-too-familiar pain. No matter how often I told myself our estrangement was the best thing for him, I hated that all Mark and I shared was a mutual loathing of yours truly. Once, I had been able to envision a different kinship between us. Once, there had even been respect.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Ain't gonna happen. Not in this cat's lifetime.

"Fine," I said. "Mark. It's me."

"What do you want, Dad?"

An alibi, I thought. A way-back machine so I can keep Bunny and me out of that room. A one-way ticket to Argentina.

"Come on, Dad." Mark had never been known for his patience, like I said. Even as a nursing baby, he had left Jolene, his mother, black and blue. "If you got something to say, say it. I'm busy here."

"Busy?" I pulled my Monte Carlo under a drooping Jacaranda tree half a block from my old residence and studied the street. No sign of suspicious cars, but did that really mean anything? I felt unseen eyes on me. This time, I knew it wasn't the drugs making me paranoid. "You on a case?"

I had to be careful, since I'd never shown much interest in Mark's job before. Would he get suspicious at my sudden curiosity?

"Yes, I'm on a case," Mark said. "That is what I do, you know."

All I could hear was his contempt. That was okay, I was used to that. Really I was.

Okay, who was I kidding? But I was a realist, and this was the world I had built for myself, so I had better learn to live in it.

I sighed. "Something interesting?"

I knew Mark was dying to become an officer in the LAPD. The only thing he wanted more, was to be discovered and ascend to the pinnacles of Hollywood stardom, or to the status of Charlton Heston, bringing down NRA sentiments from the mountain. Since that wasn't likely to happen any sooner than my getting back into his good graces, he was working up a strategy to finagle a job with

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

the LAPD. I told him the hours would suck. I told him his mother would never forgive him if something happened to him. I didn't bother telling him I didn't want to see his name on the front page of the *Times*. I sure as hell didn't want to be there to collect the flag off his coffin when they buried him. He didn't want to hear that from me.

Mark embraced anything that promised to make him look good to his potential employers. I'd heard him talk his mother's ear off following any big bust he'd been involved in, even peripherally.

"Guess you could say that. Nasty homicide down on the Boulevard."

I tried to sound bored. "Nasty how?"

I could hear someone calling Markie's name. It sounded like his partner, Preacher. I guess leave was canceled for the day. I wondered if they'd closed the booth at Gay Pride.

"ME's here," Preacher said. "We need perimeter containment setup... The watch commander's on the horn—"

"I gotta go," Mark said. "We'll talk later..."

I thought of breaking in, telling him not to believe anything he heard, despite what the proof said. That his old man was not a murderer. Not even close.

Instead, I muttered, "Yeah, yeah." Cranking the car back on, I flipped shut the phone.

Despite his ambitions, Mark was a lousy actor. If his cop buddies had put me in that room, he never would have been able to keep that to himself. I had a few more minutes.

I drove down Romaine Avenue at a crawl, eyes scanning restlessly up and down the street, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

I was disappointed to see Jolene's Hyundai parked in the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

driveway. I pulled in behind it, seeing the living room curtains twitch aside. She knew I was here.

My gaze fell on the steering wheel. The normally black vinyl was smeared with a dull red. I blinked and stared at my hands. They were covered in blood. I hastily wiped them on my jeans. The stink of blood settled in the back of my throat, threatening to make me vomit.

I thought back to how Bunny's blood had been everywhere, how I had held the door and never even noticed the sticky fluid that had fouled my hands. The door that no doubt held my fingerprints now. Prints on file in every law enforcement agency in California and probably beyond. Even if they were too smeared to use.

On top of that one, I had another memory. Bunny's mouth wrapped around my leaking cock. I watched CSI. I knew all about DNA.

I had well and truly screwed that dog. I was—

Someone's fist landed on my car window. I jumped and screamed. I spun around to find Jolene staring in at me, a frown on her freckled face.

She wasn't happy. I wasn't happy.

And I was covered in blood.

CHAPTER 2

I rolled down the window. Heat washed over me, but I barely felt it. A cold sweat lined my face. I knew I looked a fright.

“What the fuck are you up to now, Wager?” She recoiled from me. “You seen a fucking ghost? One of your tricks fuck you over?”

You might say that. I opened my mouth to speak, then shut it again. What the hell could I say? My trick was butchered while my cock was up his ass? The cops are going to swear it was me. But you gotta trust me, honey, it wasn’t.

Sure, she’d buy that. That’s why we had had such a strong marriage. Well, that and the fact that I figured out early on I liked cock better than tits. After that, she was never quite the same. I still don’t think she’s forgiven me for switching teams.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I didn't want to get out of the car. What if she saw my blood-covered clothes? She'd freak for sure. I'd been witness to too many freak-out episodes over cockroaches and the occasional mouse that dared to cross her threshold, and knew the prospect of another scene was bone chilling. She might even do something stupid, like call Markie. She was almost as enamored of our cop son as he was. She thought for sure he'd make captain some day. Me, I had my suspicions that good old Markie was fated to spend his days as a portable. Team work wasn't his strong suit, and he already had more disciplines in his jacket than citations.

"Listen, I'm too busy for this shit," Jolene continued. "Either come in, or crawl back into your hole. I told you that you had to get your own place. I'm not having the neighbors talk about you staying here anymore."

After our divorce, I'd been eager to taste my new freedom, and I'm the first to admit I'd gone a little crazy. The club scene had been on my calendar every night for nearly six months, with a different ass every night. But even that had gotten tiring after a while, and I'd gone from 7 days a week to maybe twice, then once in a blue moon. You have any idea how rare blue moons are in L.A?

Figuring I was damned close to rock bottom, I'd cajoled Jolene into letting me move into her garage, ostensibly to save rent. And help her out, of course, since finances were never her strong suit. She'd been amenable. Surprisingly, we had become not exactly friends, but partners in keeping Markie safe from knowing too much about his father. I had made it a single point of honor never to miss a child support payment. And it had paid off when I had come, hat in hand, to ask her to put me up in her garage.

What was supposed to be a month-long gig till I got back on

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

my feet, had turned into six months with no end in sight. Face it, I was comfortable, though it did mean my cruising went on in the local WeHo clubs, and the down and dirty got done in motel rooms like the Summerside.

But then my life had been ruined by the entry of Bruno, Jolene's latest squeeze. Where she had met a bozo like Bruno Capriolla is beyond even my simple mind. She said the stellar event had occurred at one of the UCLA adult education courses Jolene was always taking to "improve" herself.

The only course from which I'd seen results had been the one about foreign foods she'd attended the last year we were a domestic couple. She had taken to that one like a duck to orange sauce. And gained twenty pounds, which instantly became my problem since I was never "supportive" of her, whatever that meant. So in a way, I can credit my single state with Jolene's gluttony. As her weight ballooned, so did her temper, until she was as hair-triggered as a cat in a barbecue pit.

She wasn't even a very good cook, though God bless her, she tried.

I remember her Russian phase during that course. She had cooked up a borscht storm and insisted on reading some unpronounceable Russian writer while I tried to watch *Lost*. From what I could tell, her language skills were on par with her culinary talents.

I ate out a lot that month. I mean seriously, have you ever *seen* borscht? Forget tasting it. Don't get me started on blinis.

But with Bruno on the scene, Jolene wanted me gone. I guess the newest boy toy didn't like the ex hanging around, a constant reminder that his precious Jolene wasn't the vestal virgin she passed herself off to be. So I got my walking papers. That had been

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

a week ago. I'd actually found a place on St. Andrews off the Boulevard and would have been there by now, if I hadn't been derailed by Bunny's death.

Which brought me sharply back around to my current problem. My current major problem. How much could I tell Jolene? What would I tell Jolene?

Don't be ridiculous. I couldn't breathe a word of this to her. She'd storm roll me into the county lockup so fast, it would make my head spin. If I wanted sympathy and help, I'd have to get it someplace else. What I needed from Jolene were the rest of my things and some cash to get me through the next few days under the radar. Forget the bank account I didn't have; forget the non-existent stash under my mattress or the job I couldn't go back to. The cops would be looking for yours truly at all those places.

I offered her my most beguiling smile. It immediately made her suspicious.

"I came to get my stuff. I got a place in"—I thought fast. No way I wanted to let her know where I was crashing—"Culver City. All right if I go in and get it?"

"Culver City?" She snorted. "Since when do you even know where Culver City is? Next you'll be telling me you got a job in Anaheim."

"It could happen."

"When pigs fly."

I almost asked her if she was planning any holidays soon, then I bit my tongue. You always get more flies with honey, my sainted bitch of a mother used to say...when she was sober enough to string together a sentence. And sometimes Jolene reminded me of a fly—the one Jeff Goldblum played in that horror flick when I was a kid.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

My face hurt from smiling. I've been told often enough I have a sexy smile. But then I'm a California blond with good genetics that have held up to time. Doesn't hurt that I have a killer cock. I laughed politely at Jolene's joke and slid open the car door. Thankfully, the sun had gone behind a bank of brown-tinged clouds and the stains on my jeans were, I hoped, less obvious. Or maybe I was just praying Jolene was her usual oblivious self.

"I'll just grab my things and get out of your hair—"

She wasn't buying it. She planted herself in front of me, and when Jolene plants herself, she's a veritable redwood.

"You're up to something, Johnny. I know it."

I thought once more of denying it, then switched tactics. She wanted honest, so I'd give her honest. "Yeah, you're right. I need a Benjamin to get me to payday."

"Still working at that scuzzy bar with those human rejects?"

The Loro Azul might not win any taste awards in the scheme of Hollywood things, but it had been my home away from home for the last two years and was always good for a piece of tail at least once a week. Jolene, bless her neo-con heart, thought the senile crowd at the Longhorn on Western was the height of chic.

"Taz and Hyacinth are hardly rejects." The daring duo we called the little butch Taz and his drag-queen girlfriend, Hyacinth. My best, and only, friends. If they weren't the first people the cops would go to, I'd hit up Hy for a loan. I'd even considered going to my boss, the Jewish American Prince of Darkness, otherwise known as Sid, but he hated lending his employees anything on the general principle that they were part of the vast communist conspiracy to ruin him and send him and his family to some Siberian gulag. It didn't do any good to tell him that the Cold War was over, that Reagan, his hero, had won and the world was safe

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

from the Russkis—at least as long as Jolene wasn't butchering their language and their food. He was convinced there were secret elements conspiring to drag his beloved America into the darkness of pre-Bush rule. The election of Obama had sent him into a deep depression he still hadn't recovered from.

"Oh, please," Jolene heaved herself against my car, setting the shocks to rocking. I stared at her tits, half hanging out of her halter top. Jolene was never the maven of fashion. I still couldn't believe I used to handle those things. I shuddered. Definitely not the good old days. "So, what did you say you wanted, Johnny?"

"A short-term loan. I'll give you back the money on payday, I swear."

"Of what year?"

Ever the trusting one. I was going to be just as facetious, but thought better of it. Not a good idea to antagonize someone you want to do you a favor.

"This year. I'll pay you back end of next week." By then I'd be in jail or Argentina, or both. Or dead, though I preferred not to dwell on that option. "Swear on my mother's grave."

Jolene snorted, not a very ladylike sound. What would Bruno think? "You're mother's not dead, even though you might wish she was."

"True, true," I said. "Figuratively speaking. Look it's just a Benjamin."

"Translate that into American."

"A hundred dollars. And Benjamin was American," I countered, finally not able to resist getting her goat when I could. "One of the greatest American presidents there ever was. Even I learned that in school."

"The only thing you learned in school was how to fuck the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

teachers to get better grades. I swear, your sixth-grade teacher still cries whenever anyone mentions your name. Especially if they remind her you now bat for the other team.”

“Ah, memories. Listen,” I said hurriedly when a black-and-white sheriff’s car turned onto Jolene’s street. Markie with bad news for mommy, or just a random drive-by? I didn’t dare wait and see. “Can we take this trip down memory lane some other time and place?”

“Got a hot date?” she managed to sneer the word “date” like it was a bad thing.

I thought of poor Bunny, sliced and diced, and felt a wave of nausea. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Your stuff’s inside the garage. I oughtta hold it till I get my money back, but Bruno doesn’t like it being here. So go on, take it. I’ll get the money for you.” She glanced at her watch. A new one, I noticed. Courtesy of her new squeeze? If it was, he was a cheap prick. It was a ten-dollar Casio. Even I’d got her better things when we were together. Of course, as she’d be quick to point out, most of the stuff was stolen. But hey, it’s the thought, right?

The black and white cruised on by. I didn’t dare do more than a sideways look at it. No one I recognized. I turned back to find Jolene watching me. Normally not one to notice the nuances of life, her look this time was way too shrewd for my taste.

“You in some kinda trouble, John?”

Jesus, she never called me John. What was up with that?

“Nothing,” I said. “Just the usual.”

She grunted, knowing all too well what my “usual” was. I don’t know how many times I’d called her to bail me out of the county lockup, or even the Twin Towers in downtown L.A. At first she’d tried to talk sense into me, telling me I didn’t need to sell E or

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

break into homes looking for fenceable stuff. It didn't do any good to point out that my little "hobby" brought in more dough in a night than my bartending gig at the Loro Azul in a month.

We could both hear her phone ringing in the house, a rundown bungalow that hadn't seen a repair job in decades. I guess Bruno wasn't any handier than I'd been.

Jolene threw me a last poisonous glare and stomped through the brittle, unmowed lawn, slamming the screen door shut behind her.

Shit, the money. I followed her inside, hearing her on the phone talking in the voice she only used for one person in her life. Markie. Though who knows, maybe she talked to the new squeeze that way, too.

She cooed into the phone, then glared at me and mouthed, "What?"

I rubbed my fingers together, and I thought she was going to blow me off. Instead, she reached for her knockoff Gucci bag and dragged out her wallet. She pulled out half a yard, which I hastily stuffed into my jeans pocket.

With what I hoped was a jaunty wave, I hurried out of the house and threw open the garage door. The rich effluvium of gas and overheated oil assaulted my senses. In the nearly impenetrable gloom, I could make out the lawn mower that had been ancient when I'd bought it twenty years ago. The usual clutter filled the space: half-empty cans of paint from unfinished projects, piles of rusting tools, a red jerry can of gas for the lawn mower. And something new: a Schwinn 3-speed. Definitely not Jolene's style. Bruno's?

Two black garbage bags sat just inside the door. I grabbed both and hurried to the car, heaving them into the back seat. Seconds

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

later, Jolene came out on the front step and waved the phone frantically at me.

“Mark needs to talk to you,” she said. “It’s important.”

I’ll bet. “Sorry, can’t stay. Busy.”

I threw the car into gear and reversed out of the driveway, sideswiping the disheveled palmetto that was still struggling to survive years of summer drought. Jolene refused to water the thing. Guess who planted it? It was one of my more domestic moments, and was never repeated.

I peeled down the street. The last thing I saw out of my rear view was a very pissed Jolene standing on the curb, hands on her broad hips, her pouty grimace all too clear, even from a distance.

CHAPTER 3

I hooked a left on North Orlando, still trying to figure out where I could go that wouldn't automatically be on my rap sheet as "known places of association." Unfortunately, that left out nearly every place and every one of my acquaintances. I was almost at Santa Monica and my current hood on North Flores Street, when my cell chirped.

I checked the caller ID and saw it was Hyacinth. Not a good time, honey. I flipped open the cell and snapped, "I'm busy, can't talk—"

"Come on, sugar," Hyacinth's sultry voice was liquid honey in my ears. "You told me to call. You promised, remember?"

I promised... I promised what? Then I remembered. I'd told her that I was going to score some crystal, and she was eager to lay

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

her rhinestone-inlaid acrylics on it so she and her little Puerto Rican boyfriend, Taz, could go clubbing. They were the oddest couple I think I knew. Hyacinth was at least six-five in stocking feet, six-nine in her Jimmy Choos fuck-me shoes, and Taz had to stand on his toes to make five-five. But they'd been a couple as long as I'd known them.

She was in luck. I had the ice, and she had the money. What better match could you get? Consumer-driven economics were a drug dealer's best friend.

"We can meet..." I thought hard. Where? Now would not be the time to get nipped for a lousy drug possession, not when I had the sneaking suspicion the cops were soon going to be blood-hounding me for murder.

"There's a parking lot on Sweetzer, just south of the Boulevard," I said. "Meet me there in thirty minutes. I got the crystal in my car."

"Hey, sugar, I'll be there with bells on."

Anyone else said that and you'd figure they were being metaphorical. With Hyacinth she could be literal. Hyacinth had blown in from New Orleans, and she proved the old adage: you can take the boy out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the boy...or girl, in this case.

I broke the connection and headed back to the Boulevard. I wondered if I dared stop to grab a coffee and bear claw when my heart thumped into my ribs. A black and white trawling the street flipped on his party lights, and I damned near dumped the Monte Carlo into a pile of pedestrians waiting for a bus. I managed to swing to a safe stop seconds later and tried to compose myself. Should I try to run? That ought to make an entertaining spectacle. Could I bluff my way through?

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

A burly sergeant uncoiled from the driver's side, his baton and holstered Beretta giving him added bulk. I found myself mesmerized by the swing of his hips as he approached the driver's side of my car. I barely noticed the swish of traffic less than a foot from my door. The cop seemed oblivious to it, too. One hand brushed the top of his holstered gun, the other touched the trunk of the car.

"Please step out of the vehicle, sir." All politeness, but underneath a coil of distrust and readiness made him a very dangerous man. "Hands where I can see them."

"Sure," I said, keeping my voice steady. I slowly coiled my fingers around the steering wheel. The last thing I wanted was a nervous cop to deal with. "What's this about, Officer? Did I do something wrong?"

He didn't answer, just waited for me to obey. Like I had a choice.

No sign he knew he was pulling over a wanted felon. Maybe he hadn't called in the plates, yet? I knew they were supposed to call them in immediately. Didn't mean they always did. Cops sometimes played by their own rules on the street. Didn't Markie always brag about that? He liked playing bully boy with a baton.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hyacinth's flamingo pink Kia trundle by. Her heavily kohled eyes never once glanced my way, but I could tell by the intense frown on her narrow face that she had spotted me. I seriously doubted she'd be waiting for me in the parking lot.

"Step out of the car, sir." John Law sounded a whole lot less patient this time around. I hurried to comply, while doing my best to look innocent, an idea that would have raised howls of laughter from my friends. Most of them would say I haven't been innocent

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

since the day my bitch mother took off my diapers and whipped me with her treasured switch just because she could.

I stood beside the still-open door, arms held out from my side so there'd be no mistake about whether or not I was carrying. The khaki-shirted cop took another step forward.

"Are you aware of what you were doing when I stopped you?" All the while he talked, he never looked at me. He was too busy scanning the streets and sidewalks around us. Looking for what? I didn't care. If he wasn't watching me, he wouldn't notice the blood. I hoped.

He cleared his throat.

What had he asked me? Oh, right, did I know why he'd pulled me over. Jesus, if I knew that, I wouldn't have done it, right? I shook my head, batting my baby blues at him. He didn't respond. Damn, another straight one. Just how ineffectual were those recruitment drives? Wasting my tax money. As though I actually paid taxes.

I smiled my most appealing smile...the one that made grown men cry and women weep. Nothing. Bupkus. Zip. Don't they make real men anymore?

"No, Officer. I'm sorry, I don't. Was I speeding? I was sure I wasn't—"

He still wasn't looking at me. "Your left tail light is burned out. You need to get that fixed."

I sagged in relief. "Sure, I'll do that right away—"

"Can I see your driver's license?"

Oh shit. I glanced inside the car. "It's in my glove compartment." Even as I said it, I knew how he'd react.

Like a Pavlovian rat, he responded exactly as I expected. Cops always think you're hiding something dangerous in your glove

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

compartment. Every cop I ever met thrived on that kind of paranoia.

He tensed and dropped his hand to his holster strap again.

Could this day possibly get any worse? He signaled for me to precede him to his car. I guess it could. He popped open the back door, and without a word made it clear I was to get in.

“What about my license? My—”

“Get in the car, sir.”

Heart sinking, I did as I was told. Still, no cuffs and no call in to the station. Was that good or bad? What was going on?

He drove east along the Boulevard, pulling into a narrow side street that was little more than a refuse-filled alley backing onto several rundown businesses.

I tensed when he pulled to a stop behind a Dumpster overflowing with reeking garbage. Great, was he going to beat the crap out of the little faggot? Teach him to mind his manners around the police?

He unfolded himself from the front seat again. When he opened my door I looked up in alarm. Still without a word, he unzipped his blue serge pants and pulled out a fat five-inch cock. I didn’t need him to tell me what to do, though I wished I could have told him to dress it. But what choice did I have?

I wrapped my mouth around him and sucked as though my life depended on it. Maybe it did. It wasn’t the cleanest prick I’d ever Hoovered, but it wasn’t the worst, either. And he was pretty short-triggered, spilling a mouthful of salty cum into my mouth a couple of minutes later. I wiped my mouth on the back of my jacket, wishing I dared spit, and leaned back to look up at him.

He stuffed himself back in his uniform pants and zipped up. Then he grabbed my arm and hauled me out of the back seat.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

What, no roses?

“Now get lost,” he growled. “Don’t let me catch you again.”

Or what? I almost asked, but actually showed some restraint and nodded at his words of wisdom. No sir, won’t happen again. Cross my heart. Hope you get clap from the next poor slob you force a blow job from.

I left, retracing the path back to my Monte Carlo, which was luckily still there, doors wide open and keys in the ignition. The fine residents of West Hollywood must be slipping.

I hawked a salty gob out the open window, then keyed the car on and made my way, safely within the speed limit and observing all the traffic stops, to my rendezvous with Hyacinth. As if the silly queen would actually show up.

CHAPTER 4

Surprise, surprise, the neon Kia was in the lot when I pulled in five minutes later. Hyacinth was at the wheel, doing something unspeakable to acrylic nails that could have been registered as deadly weapons.

When she saw me, she coolly looked past me, then raised one plucked eyebrow. “You in trouble again, sugar?”

I crouched by her door and smirked at her. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I bet. You sweet talk that sheriff man out of giving you a ticket?”

“Talk don’t have nothing to do with it.”

“You’re wicked, boy.”

Her hand slipped through the open window, holding a folded

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

wad of money. I exchanged it for a small glycine pack of white crystal.

"You and Taz enjoy," I said, stuffing the cash into my jeans pocket beside Jolene's money.

"We will." She pursed her botoxed lips. "Why don't you join us? We're cruising the circuit, bound to find some fun."

"Tempting, Sugar, but I gotta pass."

"All work and no play makes Johnny a dull man."

"Ain't gonna happen." I stood up and tapped the side of her car.

Hyacinth was a lot more astute than either Jolene or the horny cop. Her eyes widened when I stood, and she stared at the dark blotches on my jacket.

"What the fuck are you up to, Wager?" All bantering left her voice, which grew more butch than I'd ever heard it. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Don't worry about it, Hy," I said. "I'll take care of it."

"Right, like you ever took care of anything in your life. Girl, you ain't got the sense God gave a bed bug."

She startled me by reaching into her Chloe bag and handing me a tiny red cell phone through the car window. "Here, take this. You be needing it if the cops try to trace what you got. It's prepaid, untraceable. You need help, you call. If you don't, I'll find you myself and kick your scrawny white ass."

Gee, who could resist that kind of maternal love? I took the phone and pocketed it with my cash. I tapped her cheek. "Don't worry, I'll take care of myself. Do me a favor though. Don't believe anything you hear. Remember you know me better than anyone else."

"What are they gonna say about you?"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I shook my head. The temptation to tell her was a heavy weight, and I would have loved to unload, but, honestly, what could she do? Except get dragged down with me. Besides, baggage made it harder to keep moving.

I ignored her pout as I made my way back to my car, one eye out for cops, the other scanning everywhere for some sign someone was watching me. I knew damn well killing Bunny and leaving me to take the fall had been deliberate. There was no other explanation. Hard as it was to believe, someone out there really didn't like Johnny Wager. Question was: who? And why?

Who would go to all this trouble to set me up for this stupid game? If they wanted me dead, it would have been easier to do that job themselves. I'm not even sure the cops would have looked too hard for the doer. Sure, I may be a cop's father, but that kind of filial devotion only went so far, and I knew there was no love lost between me and Markie. He despised me for who I was, and what I was. I'd faced the fact years ago that I wasn't much of a father, something his mother never let any of us forget. It didn't matter that I would gladly have changed that in a New York minute. If anyone had wanted me to.

But I'd been a sorry disappointment to everyone, and things weren't looking up too much in that direction. Add murder to the mix and where did that put Johnny Wager? Not in a good place.

I realized two things. I needed to dump my wheels, and I needed a place to hang my size elevens until something else rotten happened in the City Of Angels to distract the brown shirts.

The car first. I knew just where to put it to ensure it ended up in the wrong hands. Hands that would compromise any trace of DNA Bunny or I had left behind. And then even a third-rate PD could sell reasonable doubt to a jury of my peers when it came to the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

terrible things the cops were saying I did.

I'd figure out how to take care of yours truly later.

I turned the nose of my car north. Toward Los Feliz and Ferndell Park, the last bastion for cruising faggots. Not. But it was still a favored hangout, made famous by John Rechy who wrote the wholly depressing book, *Numbers*, about a loser who sets a ten-day goal to get thirty blow jobs just to prove he was still desirable. As though getting some desperate loser to drop to his knees in front of you proved you were a hot number.

That book had been one of my first inclinations that I was not alone in my tormented little world, though it was hardly a good role model for someone struggling with their need to fuck other men, even when they had a wife and son at home.

I had never planned to travel that path. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

I turned into Ferndell and grabbed a Snake Dog from The Trails. I avoided the scattering of *turistas* and hikers who had flocked to see this cultural landmark. What does it say about a place that worships so low? I mean, Tail O' The Pup is an architectural wonder in this fair town.

I drove farther into the park, one eye out for LAPD since I was on their turf now. I passed a few hikers and dog walkers, but no cops. My lucky day.

During the day, Ferndell was a nice piece of green space. After nightfall, its true nature emerged. Then the trolls and hustlers came out looking for marks...or to become one. I'd cruised here a few times and found some nice ass for my troubles. I'd also nailed a soliciting charge when I'd gone after a piece of delectable tail who turned out to be an undercover. Not cool. My PD had plea-bargained it down to a loitering, but I still had the smear on my

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

jacket.

And of course, word got back to Markie. What is it about cops and gossip? Want to keep a secret? Tell a cop, then gag him. Cops are worse gossips than hormonal teeny bitches at a rave.

I pulled the Monte Carlo off the road behind a screen of ragged, untrimmed bushes and under a massive sycamore that, with any luck, would keep out the uninterested. Tonight I had no doubt some jittery tweaker would stumble on the car and think he could score off it, thus removing it from yours truly's sphere and put it squarely in his own orbit. I wish I could have brought along my clothes, but carrying two garbage bags full of clothes said homeless bum louder than a sign. The cops would roust me for sure. I should have left them at Jolene's but she wouldn't have given me the money if I hadn't taken the clothes.

At least I could put on clean jeans. I did so in a hurry, burying the bloody ones in a garbage can, grimacing at the remnants of food and old diapers I had to dig through to make sure the clothing wasn't visible to the casual eye.

I made it easy for my nameless benefactor by leaving the keys in the ignition and all the doors unlocked.

Then I pocketed my tools from the glove compartment, grabbed the last of my ice and left the car without a backward glance. She'd been a sweet ride, the only woman in my life I could honestly speak of with affection, but she was a liability now.

As expendable as my moral conscience.

CHAPTER 5

Dusk was settling in, throwing dirty shadows over the uneven ground. I found refuge on a knife-scarred and graffitied picnic table, and watched people leaving the park. A rusted-out Pinto rattled by, heading into the park, thirty screaming tweakers hanging out of every portal, leaving a trail of rap obscenities in the fading light. They were too stoned to notice me.

The night life was arriving. Soon the park would be alive with a new kind of wildlife.

I kicked off the table and prepared to hike back to Los Feliz, where I hoped to pick up a ride into the Valley. With any luck, I could get lost there.

I heard him before I saw him. Rather, I heard his dog, snuffling and groaning like life, itself, was a hardship. It sounded big. When

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

it finally came through the brush, it turned out to be a gray-muzzled Bassett hound shuffling through the ground cover, nose down, huge ears dragging through the dirt.

I faded back into the dense brush behind the picnic table just as the dog's owner came around the bend in the road. He was a tall, lanky man, maybe six foot. His hair was wispy and thinning on top. It was a ginger color. He was clean shaven. From my distance away from him, I couldn't make out the color of his eyes.

He didn't see me.

But his dog did. It shuffled unerringly toward my hiding place, briefly lifting its face toward me, its rheumy eyes staring directly into mine. It circled my frozen legs. Then it cocked its right leg and sent a stream of warm urine over my ankle.

I yelled and jumped back, stumbling and falling on my ass. The dog sat, its massive jaws opening in a canine grin.

Before I could climb to my feet and get out of there, Lanky found us. I scrambled back, shaking piss off my pant leg. My sockless foot inside my high-tops was damp. I grimaced at the sensation.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. He's never done anything like that before. I'm sorry, so sorry... He's not usually so aggressive."

Both of us looked down at the dog, now lying in a swoon on the cracked earth under a deodar cedar. It snored softly, exhausted from all the energy it had expended.

"Nice to know I can inspire him," I muttered, wanting to split. Needing to find a washroom so I could clean up. "Listen I have to—"

"No, no, don't go," Lanky said. "Let me make it up to you."

A light bulb flared in my head. I might be on to something here. I'd taken care of my car, now I had to take care of me. I had

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

to lay down a bigger sob story.

“Damn, I was supposed to meet my friend for dinner down on the Boulevard.” I shook my leg as though I could shake off the piss, hoping he wouldn’t see any of the stains on my jacket. They might take a bit more explanation. Fortunately, the fading light helped in my defense.

I tried another gambit, blinked my baby blues at him and leaned toward him slightly, inviting. I was heartened to see his own eyes—a nice hazel, I noticed—darken appreciably. All right, Mary, I had a live one here. Maybe he was doing a bit more than just walking his dog.

I smiled. “I’m Johnny. Johnny Wager.” I stuck out my hand.

He took it in a surprisingly strong grip. “Tyler,” he said. “Tyler Rogers.” He looked down affectionately at the dog. “This is Columbo.”

Now my first desire had been to drop kick Fido into the next county, but I’d learned long ago that dog people were usually gaga over their pets, and the way to their hearts—or wallets or dicks—was through their dogs. I reached down and patted the slobbering thing’s head, thankful it didn’t try to return the favor.

“Nice dog,” I said with all the sincerity my forty years of hustling had taught me to fake.

“Yes, he is. He’s smart as a whip and has tons of personality.”

I studied the motionless animal and thought he had about as much personality as a door stop, but what did I know? Maybe the thing was a veritable doggy Einstein under that wrinkled brow and slobbering jowls.

“I can see that.”

“You own dogs, Johnny?”

I could tell he liked saying my name. I nodded sadly. “Used to.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

He...passed...two months ago. We used to come up here to walk. He loved chasing squirrels.” Or was it rabbits you found in Griffith Park?

“What kind was he?”

I scrambled through my brain for some kind of plausible answer. Neither Jolene nor I had been into pets, and my mother...well, forget her. Her idea of an animal in the house was one of her biker bears. Like the asshole who diddled little Johnny whenever Mommy was out of the house collecting her welfare check. That one had lasted six long months until Mommy had caught him drinking her booze.

“Lassie,” I said.

“Oh, a collie. Nice dogs. Lot of brushing though, didn’t you find?”

“Yeah, lots.” I stepped closer to him. He developed an all-too-familiar tension. I didn’t need to look to know his basket was swelling. I kept smiling. “Say, maybe I can come back to your place to clean up. You can tell me all about Columbo.”

His tension increased, and I knew what he wanted. But caution warred with lust. I had to tip the balance. “I’d love to talk about dogs...I miss Lassie so much.”

His doubt melted away, and he gestured back up the road toward Western Canyon Road. “I’m parked there.” He slapped his thigh and called, “Columbo, come on boy. Time to go home.”

Columbo rolled ponderously to his feet and eyed my dry pant leg with keen interest. I adroitly stepped away at the same time, following Tyler up the curving road to where a silver BMW sat in the shade of a sycamore tree. Or what would have been shade before the sun went down. Now, I saw only a massive ghostly trunk.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

He unlocked the car and put the dog in the back seat. I went around to the passenger side and slid in, buckling up before he could climb in and start the car.

He lived up Canyon Drive in the hills above Los Feliz, in a Tudor-style faux castle with just enough Cali-Spanish to leave no doubt as to its origin. The only things missing were the moat and alligators. The lawn was carved out of the gentle slope, and a giant bird bath full of short, colorful flowers sat in a stone alcove.

After parking on the cobblestone drive, he led me to the front door. Columbo plodded along behind us. Tyler let us all into the cool foyer, a deceptively small area that immediately opened into a two-story hallway dominated by skylights and massive redwood beams. Pools of light, strategically placed, bathed the oak floors and several brightly colored area rugs.

Tyler saw where my eyes were focused and murmured, “They’re Peruvian wool. Nice, huh?”

“Nice,” I agreed.

“Come on. I’ll show you where the bathroom is. You can get out of those clothes, and I’ll toss them in the washing machine.”

As I trailed after him, he threw over his shoulder, “I’ve got a robe you can put on. If you like, you can take a shower while I wash your clothes.”

This was sounding better and better.

“You live here alone?” I asked.

“No,” he said quickly, too quickly. But I pretended to believe him.

The dark stains on my denim jacket had pretty well soaked in and dried to a hard crust. My sockless feet still felt damp.

Tyler disappeared toward the back of the house, reappearing with a floor-length, forest-green velour robe. He showed me the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

bathroom—a baroque mishmash of styles from the seventeenth, eighteenth and twenty-first centuries that worked surprisingly well together.

“I’ll go make us some coffee.” He shut the door behind me after telling me to dump my clothes outside.

I stripped, wrapped everything up in the urine-soaked socks and jeans, hoping it would discourage him from doing more than dumping the whole pile in the washer. I put everything outside except the contents of my pockets, which I stuffed into the large pockets of the robe I had hung on the back of the door. I stepped into the dual-jetted shower that was big enough to hold two comfortably. Hot water sluiced away more than dirt and blood. It also revived me. I raised my face to the wet heat and opened my mouth to let the water pour over my lips and teeth. His shampoo smelled of green apples, and I covered my body with it, carefully cleaning out my various orifices until I squeaked. If I read Tyler right, I’d soon be making use of those. I should have invited him to join me. We could both be clean for what was coming. I was surprised to find myself growing hard at the prospect. After the horror of Bunny, I hadn’t been sure I’d ever get it up again.

I stayed there until my skin was pruned and the hot water had gone tepid. Then I rinsed off, wrapped myself in the sinfully soft robe and padded barefoot out of the bathroom, searching for my host.

I found him in the kitchen, which in sharp contrast to the bathroom, was so modern it looked like the cockpit of some new age space station. Do space stations have cockpits? He’d changed, too...into a pair of track pants...and his hair was damp. So he had showered. Alone. Too bad. He looked up when I entered and smiled, showing a nice set of very white teeth.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Your clothes are in the washer. They should take about an hour.” He handed me a steaming mug of fragrant coffee and said, “Fair trade Colombian.” Like I knew what that meant. I thought fair trade was when the local drug cartel paid off the *policizia* to protect their coca fields. Turned out it meant fair wages for Juan Valdez and his mule. Who knew?

Make conversation. Loosen the mark up. “So,” I said over the brim of my mug. “What do you do, Tyler?”

“Film production.”

Ah, Hollywood money. Good stuff. “For a studio?” Hoping he’d say Disney or Paramount. But he was shaking his ginger mop.

“My own. Panther Pictures. We turn out about a hundred straight-to-video DVDs a year.”

Was that good or bad? I tried to look suitably impressed. “Anything I might know?”

He looked me up and down, pausing to dwell on the bare leg I had cocked and thrust out of the part in the robe.

“I doubt it.”

Was I being insulted? But Tyler shook his head and added, “I produce adult videos.”

Porn? I glanced around the richly decorated kitchen. It paid well, I could see. “Maybe I’ve seen some. I get around.”

“I make straight porn.”

Ah, he had me there. I might enjoy the occasional fuck and suck, but my tastes were on another track. I made some non-committal noises. Was I wrong about this guy?

“But I have my own collection,” he said, stepping closer, his coffee breath warm on my face. “Maybe you’d like to see some?”

“Love to.” I touched his elbow.

He led me out of the kitchen, circling a sunken living room that

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

was all blond wood, steel and chrome. The neutral walls sported several beautifully framed prints. I paused to study them. Two by Hieronymus Bosch and one by Albrecht Durer I recognized from my last trip to a special exhibit at the MOCA. I noticed a couple interesting welded sculptures. A pair of massive Chinese earthenware jars guarded a second doorway.

I went to stand in front of the Bosch work I recognized. "It's heavy," I said.

"Man," he responded like we'd practiced the shtick. "This Hieronymus Bosch is heavy."

"Yeah," I deadpanned. "That's because he deals with man's inclination toward sin, in defiance of God's will."

Tyler grinned.

"Volcano!" we both said at the same time.

"Loved that movie. So bad it was good."

"Yeah, well anytime you get to see L.A. incinerated, it can't be a bad thing." Then we sobered, and I guessed he was thinking the same thing I was—how recently L.A. had nearly burned. But not from any fictional volcano.

Tyler shrugged it off. "I'm a big fan of Tommy Lee Jones."

"Me, too."

"But how do you know Bosch?"

"I visit the museums whenever I can." I was close enough to touch him, but I held back. I wanted this evening to last. "Surprised?"

"No," he said too quickly. "Not at all."

"Liar," I said, but I was smiling when I did so. "There's more to me than most people think."

He turned his dark intense gaze on me. "I'm interested."

"Good."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“So where did you pick up a taste for fine art?”

“I had a teacher in high school who used to talk it up all the time. He’d take a few of us over to MOCA or the J. Paul Getty. He got me hooked on museums. I still go.”

We left the living room through the doorway guarded by the Chinese vases.

In the next room, the TV had to have been as big as the living room of my new Hollywood apartment...60-inch-wide screen plasma with a surround-sound system that was almost wasted on porn.

Almost.

I watched as Tyler fed several disks into a multi-disc player and fired up the system.

The dog had followed us and flopped over on my bare feet. Tyler was amused.

“He must really like you.”

I looked down in alarm, my toes curling away from him.

“He’s not going to piss on me again, is he?”

Tyler flushed. “No, I told you that was a mistake. He doesn’t normally—”

“I know. Hey, he got us together.”

“Yeah.” Tyler laughed. “You want another coffee? Beer?”

“I’d love a beer.”

He left and came back shortly with two open Grolschs and a couple of pilsner glasses. I ignored the glass and upended the bottle, draining a third before I sighed and sat back, stretching my bare legs out in front of me. Tyler settled in beside me, our hips touching. He pushed play and the opening credits appeared.

The setting was a gym. Two blond Adonises appeared, clad in nothing but workout shorts, showing a nice expanse of glistening

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

muscles. The bulkier of the pair lay back on an exercise bench and his partner straddled him, leaning down to lick and suck a path down the bare, glistening chest. The camera followed with great, loving detail. I could see a mole under the left nipple. A single bead of sweat rolled off the smooth-as-silk pecs.

I responded to the sight, and one glance sideways told me Tyler was aroused, too. I slid my fingers over the swelling bulge between his cotton-clad legs and felt his growing heat. He shifted in his seat and pushed his groin into my hand. He covered my hand with his, pressing my fingers against his thickening cock.

The two golden boys were joined by a third man, a black who had clearly been hired for the size of his dick. He was as fat around as my arm, but the blond honeys had no trouble accommodating him. To see that giant piece of meat sliding up one blond chute after another was inspiring.

I fumbled with Tyler's fly and slid out his own fat six inches.

At my feet, the dog snored.

CHAPTER 6

Tyler leaned back, his eyes closed. His hand cupped the back of my head and urged me down. I complied, sliding my lips around his leaking head, tracing the outline of his piss slit with my tongue. His warm musk filled my senses, and I could taste the salt oozing from him.

He moaned and thrust his hips into the air, pushing his dick down my throat.

“Oh fuck, baby. Suck me.”

I sucked harder, feeling his balls climb up into his scrotum as his orgasm approached. I pulled away as the first shot of ropery cum erupted from him. It covered my chin and his shirt. He sagged into the couch, his breath slowly evening out and his chest settling into a steady rhythm.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I leaned back with him, letting my robe fall open to reveal my thick boner.

On screen, the two blonds shot their own load, followed by the monster black dick spewing all over them.

Tyler's fingers closed over my cock, squeezing me from my balls to my slit, milking me. I threw back my head and groaned as the pressure mounted. He ran his tongue around my fat head, licking up droplets of pre-cum. When his finger went in my ass, I rolled over to give him fuller access. I was plugged from both ends, and I was about to cream.

Before I could, he pulled off my dick and shoved me onto my back, pushing my legs open and ramming two fingers up me. His other hand wrapped around my erection and began to pump me furiously. At the same time, he stroked my prostate with the tips of his fingers.

I came, blasting all over my stomach.

Tyler left the room and returned with a warm, damp cloth, which he used to clean off both of us. I relaxed against his shoulder when the next video began. This one featured a pair of jarheads in a meadow with nothing on but their dog tags. The movie ended with top gun pounding the shit out of the grunt until they both exploded on camera.

When the third show started, I was expecting more of the same. Imagine my surprise when a woman and a man showed up on a boat and started going at it.

Tyler must have sensed my confusion. He looked over at me with a sly smile. "Gotta check out some potential talent. Always looking for fresh faces...and other things. Don't worry, I got lots more in my private collection we can check out after this."

"I'm a patient man," I said, picking up my neglected bottle,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

hoping there was more beer where that came from.

“Good.” And we settled down to watch the DVD. I endured another half hour of the pair on the boat fucking and sucking until the guy blew his load all over the girl’s impressive ass.

Then another video started. A warehouse at night. A security guard, face shadowed, made his rounds, flashlight in hand. Suddenly, a woman in a trench coat appeared, the light from the guard’s torch catching her. Fiery red hair spilled over the low-cut peasant blouse she wore under the coat. She was coming out of a dark office, and it was clear she wasn’t supposed to be there. The guard confronted her. She responded in true porno fashion by exposing herself and reaching for his belt. They both got things uncovered, and soon he was plowing her with an impressive tool.

Then the camera angled closer onto the guy’s face as he was about to come. I sprayed a mouthful of imported beer all over Tyler, the sleeping dog and my own dick.

“What the fuck—” Tyler scrambled away from the shower.

I barely acknowledged him. “Who the fuck is that?”

“Who?”

“That actor,” I snapped. “Who is he?”

Tyler lunged off the sofa and scooped up the DVD jewel case. He flipped it over and read the credits. “Lola England and, uh, Dirk Canyon. You know them?”

Not her. Him. I would have spit again, but my mouth was too dry. Dirk Canyon, my ass.

It was Mark.

“You know them?” Tyler asked again.

I wasn’t about to admit that the man with his cock up Lola’s cunt was my own son, L.A. Sheriff’s Deputy, Marcus Ernest Wager. I shook my head. “Sorry. Thought it was a guy I knew. Not

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

him.”

Tyler nodded. “They say everyone has a double somewhere. Funny that.”

“Yeah, funny.” I watched Mark blow his load all over Lola’s tits and couldn’t help but wonder what Jolene would think about that. I was tempted to ask for a dupe of the video to send to her so she could see, firsthand, what her precious boy was up to. But even I couldn’t stoop that low.

Could I?

So: “Could I get a copy of that?”

“Thought you weren’t into het.”

“I want to show it to my friend. I’m sure he’ll get a kick out of it.”

“Sure,” Tyler said. “I’ll burn you a copy before you leave.”

Fortunately, he moved on to another DVD, and I didn’t have to endure any more images of my son porking some randy female. The next video was unabashedly male on male, and I got my game back on.

Tyler fetched two more Grolsch’s, and we snuggled together on the sofa, watching one hot-and-heavy action piece after another. When that got stale, we switched to Hollywood blockbusters and watched an unreleased screener that was supposed to be the next summer mega-hit. I was duly unimpressed.

I was also falling asleep. Between the beer and the sex and a day heavy with excitement, I was losing my fight against sleep. Tyler must have noticed...hard not to when I was yawning and dropping my head on his shoulder.

“You want to go to bed?”

I debated between an enthusiastic “yes” and a more restrained “sure, that would be nice.” It would never do to let him see too

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

much eagerness. But in the end, sheer exhaustion dictated my “love to.”

“Do you need to call your friend?”

It took me a groggy ten seconds to remember my story of meeting with a friend for dinner. I shrugged carefully. “It was only tentative. I’ll give him a call tomorrow and we’ll raincheck.”

Tyler grinned. Columbo rolled over and pressed his head against my ankles. He not only snored, he drooled. I hoped he didn’t get invited into the bedroom, too.

Tyler grabbed my clean clothes out of the dryer and led me into his bedroom. It had a smaller TV at the foot of the bed. More interesting were a pair of framed photographs on the oak dresser. Both showed Tyler in a military outfit. In one, he was alone, all spit and polished in what I was sure was a Marine uniform. The other pictured him with several similarly dressed men in a desert someplace with a whole brace of heavy duty armament. Tyler had gone to war. Iraq? Afghanistan? Interesting. Being from Southern California, I’d fucked my share of grunts, but not so many Marine officers. So, from the Marines to producing porn. Wow. Talk about a career change.

He set my clothes down on a cedar chest at the foot of the bed. Asking him to turn on the news was a dangerous move, but I had to see if I’d made it into the nightly coverage, so I asked. He clicked over to Channel 5, and we rolled under the feather comforter, fooling around enough to bring us both to another orgasm. I didn’t want to move after that. I sprawled half on, half off him, my hand playing with the light dusting of hair on his chest.

The TV droned on; the news started. The lead international story was a terrorist attack on a US army base. Tyler leaned

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

forward for that. Looking for familiar names or faces? The lead local story was about a teacher in Westwood who had been held at knife point by a trio of fifth graders. According to the on-scene reporter, the students hadn't liked the grades she'd handed out on their recent report cards. At the first commercial break, the anchorman faced the camera and in dulcet tones said, "After the break, a West Hollywood man is sought for the gruesome murder of a teenager in a local motel."

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. I waited until the commercials were almost over and turned toward Tyler. "I could use another beer."

Tyler left the room, padding toward the kitchen. I climbed out of bed once he was gone and stuffed the pockets of my jeans with the tools I had rescued from my car's glove compartment. On the TV, the news program returned with the anchor's voice-over: "West Hollywood Sheriff's Department are on the alert for John Mark Wager, wanted in the slaying of Daron Najarian at the Sunnyland Motel on Santa Monica Boulevard, a known homosexual prostitution hangout. Police will not comment on the details, but early eyewitness accounts report a scene of total carnage. A blood bath, someone said. Najarian and his family emigrated to this country from Albania in 1991."

I damned near choked on my tongue when they flashed my last mug shot on the screen. I remembered that bust. I'd been caught with enough ice to roll me over into an intent-to-sell charge. From the mug shot, I looked like a spike. Ouch. My picture was followed by a booking shot of Bunny, looking even younger than he had in the motel when I'd shoved my dick up his ass.

Tyler re-entered the bedroom, two beers in hand. I admired his well-defined chest with its fine covering of red hair. For an old

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

guy, he didn't look bad. I hurriedly glanced back at the TV, but the images on the screen had changed to the motel, sheriff's black and whites in the lot, and crime scene tape fluttering on the stairs leading up to where Bunny had met his fate. Standing at the bottom of the stairs were Preacher and Mark. Mark had on his ubiquitous shades, and his hands braced on his hips. With Mark, everything was spit polished. I swear he ironed his tie and his Calvin Kleins. Just thinking of Mark's Calvins took me back to images of him and the zaftig redhead, Lola, doing the horizontal tango. I shuddered. There are some things a father should not know about his son.

An enterprising reporter had clearly done his research, and the next thing I saw were the doors to the red brick LASD West Hollywood Station. Mark was waylaid on his way in.

I batted my eyes at Tyler. "God, I'm starving. You wouldn't have anything to snack on, would you?"

"Is it true your father has been accused of this terrible crime?" the reporter asked. "Did you know he took young teen boys to motel rooms for sex—"

Tyler jumped back up. "I have some fruit in the fridge. Or there's cheese and crackers, whichever you like."

"The cheese and crackers would be perfect." It would take some time to get a plate of that ready. My gaze went back to the screen after Tyler left the room.

I knew Mark well enough to see his fury and wondered if he'd lose it on air. But he held his temper and muttered, "No comment." And vanished into the station, along with Preacher, who also snapped a no comment.

The door closed behind them. The reporter faced the camera and intoned a recap of what he had already said.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Finally, the weather came on, followed by sports, at which point Tyler switched to a show where all the cops were heroes, the bad guys always lost and no one ever got coerced into a blow job.

I ate the crackers and cheddar he brought back with him. Then I dozed off to the sound of canned laughter. I knew it was wrong. I never should have let down my guard that way. But my stomach was full, my dick was empty and my frazzled nerves had gone quiescent.

I woke to the sound of talking heads droning. I recognized the voice. Another local news anchor. Tyler had changed channels yet again. I wasn't paying attention to the words. I should have been. Instead, I burrowed deeper under blankets smelling vaguely of sex and Tyler, both comforting odors. My dick stiffened.

I reached for Tyler, feeling a little randy and thinking a midnight fuck would go down well. I groped, found only empty sheets. After rolling over, I propped myself on one elbow. "Where—"

I found myself staring up the barrel of a very large gun held in two hands that didn't look all that steady. I forced my eyes past the cannon-sized bore to the pale face above it.

CHAPTER 7

From the TV I heard my name and didn't need to look at the screen to know that the story of Bunny's gruesome death was being replayed. The same words spoken: "...teenage boy... carnage...a blood bath."

"Who are you?" Tyler asked.

I tried to look harmless, splaying my empty hands on top of the blanket over my fading tumescence. "It's not like you think."

"Who the fuck are you?" he shouted, the gun shaking violently.

"I didn't kill him. Please put that thing away."

He ignored me.

"Tyler."

"Don't. Don't say my name. Why did you do it? He was just a kid. They said he wasn't even twenty-one."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“I didn’t—”

“Were you going to kill me, too? Slit my throat while I slept? Rob me?”

“No. You have to believe me.”

He reached for his bedside phone with one hand still on the gun. The sidearm shook even more. I was mesmerized, wondering when his finger was going to slip and splatter my brains all over the headboard. My mouth was dry; I couldn’t swallow.

He punched in nine, then one. Before he could finish the call, I surged forward, throwing the sheets off my naked body. Startled, he dropped the phone and gripped the gun with both hands again. “Don’t move.”

My mind spun furiously. If he called 911, I was pooched. The LAPD would respond. And face it, I did not have a good relationship with those people.

“Call Deputy Sheriff Mark Wager,” I said and threw out his cell number. “He’s a West Hollywood sheriff. He already knows the case.”

“Wager?”

I dropped my gaze to my lap and my shriveled, useless dick. “He’s my son.”

“Your son’s a cop? What the fuck is that about?”

“Trust me, he’s not exactly thrilled either. But you can trust him. He’s a straight arrow, in every sense.” I had to hope Tyler wouldn’t recognize him from the video.

I waited to see if he was going to finish his 911 call. When he disconnected and punched in Mark’s number, I breathed a sigh. He still held the gun on me, but I didn’t think he meant to use it anymore. Not unless I did something stupid, which I had no intention of doing.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

The phone rang incessantly, then I heard a voice on the other end. Tyler gripped the phone with white knuckles, not paying as much attention to me or the gun. Maybe I could have made a break for it, but I didn't want to risk a fight over the weapon. So far I hadn't hurt anyone. If I shot this guy, or worse, all bets were off. I had one small chance to maybe convince Markie I didn't do Bunny like they all thought.

"Sheriff Wager? This is Tyler Roger. I'm here with a man who claims to be your father—"

I could hear Mark interject with free-flowing verbal diarrhea. Even Tyler, who had to be more than familiar with that kind of language, winced and held the phone away from his ear. "He says he's Johnny Wager. Is that your father?"

He met my gaze. "You have ID?"

I pointed at the robe on the floor beside the bed. He waved the gun muzzle at me. "Get it."

I did as he told me and fished out my wallet. He took it from me and pulled out my driver's license, reading the information to Markie. More cursing, then Tyler recited his address and disconnected the phone.

"He's going to be here in fifteen minutes." He frowned and vaguely waved the gun around. "He said not to let you go anywhere."

As if. I couldn't take my eyes off his finger on that trigger.

Markie must have broken every traffic law on the books. I actually felt relief when he pounded on the door ten minutes later. Tyler waved the gun at me to stay put, then went to let him in.

I prayed Markie hadn't included his partner in this little venture and was actually happy to see him enter the bedroom a minute later, alone. Tyler followed. He no longer carried the gun. At least

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Markie had disarmed him. The two were carrying on a casual conversation, and I heard Markie say, “Marines, huh? What unit?”

“First Battalion, Ninth Division. Came out of Pendleton originally.”

I could tell Markie was impressed. I never understood why he didn’t enlist...probably his mother’s influence. She had never been crazy about the cop thing, but in the forces...going overseas to war? Not if she could help it.

Markie was in full uniform, and his gun hand rested above the butt of his Beretta while he studied me on the bed. Like me, Markie looked younger than he was. In his case, he looked like a high school kid playing at being a cop. I had pulled the sheets up around my chest, but it didn’t take a genius to know I was naked underneath. But then, apart from his hastily donned robe, so was Tyler.

I was all too aware that the room smelled of sex and sweat. Markie’s nose wrinkled, but he gave nothing of his thoughts away. The quintessential cop.

“You’re under arrest,” he said. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You can arrange for an attorney when we get back to the station.” He didn’t waste time reciting the whole rigmarole about the right to an attorney and how one would be given to me if I couldn’t afford one on my own. Markie knew damn well I didn’t have a pot to piss in. The state paid for me all the way every time.

He didn’t even use my name. He just pulled out his bracelets and dangled them in one hand, the other still hovering over his sidearm. Like he was begging me to resist.

“You finally crossed the line, didn’t you? Small time shit until now, but you just couldn’t stop.” Markie twisted my arms behind

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

my back and snapped on the cuffs. He hauled me off the bed. The sheets tangled around my legs and only his hand on my arm kept me from pitching onto my face. He jerked me around so I was facing him. "Did you really think you could get away with it? Are you really that stupid?"

I bristled at being called stupid, even if I was feeling that way at the moment. I rattled my cuffs. "You really have to do this? What do you think I'm going to do? Run?"

"You already did, didn't you?" Markie snarled in my face, his hot, sour breath striking me. "I told Mom I needed to talk to you, but you couldn't wait around. We found your...crap in that hotel room. Did you really think we weren't going to know whose it was? Your fucking prints were all over everything, and your buddy at the front desk rolled over on you in about five minutes."

I reared away from his rage, not getting where it came from. He'd spent a lifetime being disappointed in me. Why was this time so different? I glanced over at Tyler. His pale face reflected his fear. I was actually sorry I'd done this to him. I had really started liking the guy.

When Mark dragged me toward the bedroom door, I planted my bare feet on the carpeted floor. When that didn't work, I sat down. Maybe my resistance took him by surprise. He stopped and glared at me.

"You can at least let me get dressed," I snapped. I glanced sideways at Tyler and found he wasn't watching me. Instead, he was staring at Markie.

He frowned, squinting at my son. When he glanced toward his living room, I suddenly knew where his mind was going. He was beginning to realize he had seen Markie before, in all his glory, boffing the zaftig Lola, porn queen. Maybe it was the uniform that

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

threw him. Or maybe it was the thought that there was no way a Los Angeles County sheriff could be a porn star. He wasn't the only one thinking that.

Markie's cop instinct kicked in, and he jerked around to stare at Tyler. His body was riddled with tension. I wanted to intervene, but then Tyler's eyes shot over to me.

"This is the guy, isn't it?" His eyes widened. "This is the guy in the video."

"No, remember I said I was wrong—"

"Bullshit." Tyler stepped forward, gaze locked on Markie. "It *is* him. Holy shit."

Now Markie was looking puzzled...and pissed. Things were going sideways on him, and he didn't like it one bit. "What are you two cooking up here? What video—"

He was the last to get it. He paled as it hit him. Apparently trying to divert the situation, he jerked me to my feet. "I'm on duty here. I need to get him to the station for booking—"

I spun away from him, and he body-checked me, proning me on the floor where I got a mouthful of rug.

"Don't try it," he hissed in my ear. "Shut up and get out of here."

"Let me put my clothes on."

Again Markie hauled me upright. My shoulders ached from the pressure on them. He stepped back from me, his hand hovering over his gun. With the other hand, he used his key to release my hands. Then he barked at Tyler. "Get his clothes."

Tyler scrambled to obey.

I fumbled to put on my now-clean clothes while Markie waited impatiently. I had barely zipped my jeans closed and pulled my T over my head when he jerked my hands back behind me and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

snapped them into restraints again. I yelled at his roughness.

“My jacket—”

“Shut up and follow me. And you,” he snarled at Tyler. “Whatever you think you saw, forget it. Keep thinking it was someone else.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. Did he really think that was going to happen?

Thoroughly pissed off now, Markie dragged me through the house and out the front door. I knew Tyler was following us, but we both ignored him...me because I had no choice, Markie because he was focused on forcing me out to his car.

And it was his car. He didn't have a black-and-white patrol car. That surprised me since he was wearing his uniform.

I always thought of his car as his stud mobile. A cherry-red Corvette coupe. There was no back seat in the thing.

He stuffed me in the passenger's seat and crossed to the other side. When he shut the door with a thunk and cranked on the engine, I opened my mouth to say something, only to close it when he glared at me.

The car snapped into gear, and the engine screamed as we raced down the street toward Los Feliz. As soon as we turned the first corner, he slammed on the brakes, throwing me forward with a startled “Hunh” that he ignored.

He was still furious when he dragged me out of the car, banging my head on the low-hanging roof and wrenching my shoulders even more. Convinced he was going to start whaling on me, I tried to head butt him and break free of his hold. With a contemptuous growl, he forced me up on the curb and shoved me over the car's warm hood.

“Shut up and stop fighting me.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I was helpless and knew it. But I couldn't give up. I kept struggling to straighten, and he held me down until the strength fled from me, and I had none left. I sagged against the hood, hearing the soft tick of cooling metal from the engine inside.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "Why did we stop? I would have thought you'd be in a hurry to take me in. Get the glory for the big bust."

Figuring my words would set off the always-volatile Markie, I braced for a new assault. Instead, he gripped my hands, and seconds later the cuffs were gone. I leaned my elbows on the car hood and rubbed the chafed flesh of my wrists. When I looked up, he was staring back the way we had come from Tyler's house.

I said the first inane thing that came into my head. "You're not on duty, are you?"

Markie remained distracted. He answered without looking at me. "No." Clearly reluctant to talk. He began pacing in front of his car, shoulders hunched forward, tension still riddling his bent spine.

"I thought I was under arrest."

"Not yet," he snapped. "You want to be?"

"I didn't kill him," I said softly.

"I know."

Whatever I had been expecting him to say, it wasn't that. My mouth dropped open, and for probably the first time in my life, I didn't have any words to say. Then I found my voice.

"You knew. You knew when you came out here that I wasn't guilty."

"Let's say I suspected it. I realized they were trying to divert our attention, even if the idiots up the line didn't."

"Divert?" I confess I was totally lost now. What the fuck was

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

he talking about? “Who wanted to divert your attention?”

Markie still wasn't meeting my eyes. “Your...boyfriend was a C.I.” Markie's tension swelled. He was furious, but this time it wasn't directed at me. “They broke his cover. That's what got him killed.”

“What the hell is a C.I?”

“Confidential Informant. Our detectives run them, usually in exchange for reduced charges or consideration for sentencing.”

“So you turn some poor schmuck you catch doing something only semi-illegal and send him to chase down the real bad guys?”

“Hey, you guys will turn on each other like a starving dog on a steak. We just put your tendencies to good use.”

I knew I was way out of my league here. Hell, I suspected I'd never been in this league. “Who?”

“The Armenian mob.”

“Is that like the Mafia?”

“A lot less organized and a whole lot nastier. Think pit bull crossed with rattlesnake, only not as friendly.”

“What the hell did they have against...” I wanted to say the name I'd heard in the news, but it wouldn't come to me, so I had to say the only name I knew him by, “Bunny.”

“You mean Daron Najarian? Bunny? Is that what you called him?”

“That's what he called himself. He said he was going to explain it.” I thought of the way he had looked the last time I'd seen him. “Later. He said he'd tell me later.” I shook my head. “What was he helping you with?”

“Not me,” Markie said, and his bitterness came through loud and clear. “Detectives Delham and Garrett. It was their case.”

I knew the fact that it was anyone else's case ate at him. I

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

probably shouldn't have pressed him, but I needed to know why Bunny had died.

"What were they investigating?"

"Bootlegging and money laundering, plus foreclosure rescue frauds and loan-modification schemes. Big money in those since the meltdown."

"Bootlegging? What, booze? I thought that went out with moonshine."

"Movies. You ever download a movie from the Internet without buying it? Get one before it was released on DVD? Buy them in those flea markets that pop up every weekend?"

I snorted. "Marki—Mark, I don't even own a computer. How could I download anything?"

"I'm surprised you didn't steal one," he said in acid tones. Off my scowl, he said, "You're the exception then. Even Mom goes online. Her new boyfriend set her up." Markie grimaced. Thinking of Bruno? He had it worse than me. He had to worry about the clown becoming his stepfather. I'm sure that generated images he would rather have not had. Me, I could care less who the ex was banging. I stopped paying her child support when Markie hit his majority. After that, Jolene was on her own.

"So what's the big deal, anyway? What's a few movies?"

"Except it's not just a few. It's a multi-billion dollar industry, and terrorist groups have been implicated in it, so some of those big bucks are going into new weapons for suicide bombers. Plus, they can use the whole business to launder money from other illicit revenue. That's not quite nothing."

"What other revenue?"

"We think drugs, probably meth. Maybe black tar heroin."

I noticed it was "we" again. Markie wanted this so bad he

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

could probably taste it.

“Okay, so it is a big deal.”

His passion for the subject surprised me. Markie had never been known for investing much time in any cause that didn’t get him laid or paid. “Now that Bun-Daron is out of the picture, is the case in the toilet?”

“Seriously? I don’t know.” He swung around and stood in front of me. “What do you remember about it?”

Rubbing my bare arms, I thought of my jacket at Tyler’s. I doubted I’d ever see it again since I could hardly go back asking for it.

“I remember masks. They were wearing balaclavas.”

“Gloves?”

I scanned through the memories I would rather forget. “Yeah, gloves. All-black clothes, too.”

“Boots?”

“I wasn’t looking. They cold cocked me two seconds after they broke down the door— Wait, someone must have noticed the door was broken in. Why would I need to do that? I had the key.”

“It was noticed. But the only prints of interest pulled off it were those in Najarian’s blood. Yours.”

“I told you, they wore gloves.”

“Good for them. Not so much for you.”

“So I could still go down for this?”

“Word from the top is they want this solved. It’s making the gay community very antsy.”

Since the GBLT community was a major political force in West Hollywood, I could imagine the pressure felt by the city officials. Shafting me for the crime was going to make some people very happy and piss off others no end. I feared there would

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

be more of the former.

“The mayor is not happy,” Markie added unnecessarily.

“Why are you doing this, Mark?”

He shrugged and wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“You could get me out of your life permanently if you just let it go. You’d be happy. Jolene would be happy. The mayor would be happy. Why?”

Markie grimaced, and I thought he was going to refuse to answer. Finally, he sighed. “Because you’re my father. God forgive me, and as much as it pains me, you are my father.”

CHAPTER 8

If this had been a feel-good movie of the week, we would have hugged at that point, and our rift would have been put behind us and forgotten amid sappy violin music. Didn't happen. He stepped away from me and circled back around to the driver's side. He climbed in and shut the door. When the engine roared to life, I stepped back just in time to avoid having my toes crushed. I watched his taillights vanish around the next street corner.

My first temptation was to return to Tyler's. That thought died a quick death. The memory of his shaking gun hand remained with me more than the memory of the sex we'd had. One had been admittedly good; the other had been downright scary.

I started walking downhill. I'd hit Los Feliz before too long, and from there I could resume my trip north into the Valley. I was

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

exhausted, and wanted nothing more than to find a place I could lay my head and shut out the world for a while. But there was no place on this side of the mountain. I no longer had a home I could go to. I'd hardly miss it. I hadn't actually lived there.

I saw very few cars on the windy streets. The blue glow of TVs flared and pulsed in nearly every window. I set a few dogs to barking, but I didn't linger long enough to draw anyone outside to investigate. Every time a pair of headlights swept onto the street in front of me, I tensed, waiting for the black-and-white form to pull beside me and ask me what I was doing up here this time of night. Once it was clear I didn't live in the area, it would only be a matter of minutes before I was invited down to the Hollywood station. A want out on me would no doubt show up for West Hollywood, and this time it wouldn't be Markie who showed up to take me in.

I was on Los Feliz heading for Western and Thai Town when I remembered the cell phone Hyacinth had given me. It had been so small, I had crammed it into my jeans pocket along with the tools I took out of my car. I pulled it out and activated it, gratified to see it come on at once. I punched in her number. It rang so many times, I was sure it was going to go into voice mail, and I knew I couldn't leave a message. Disappointed, I started to flip it closed when a breathless voice came on. Only it wasn't Hyacinth, but Taz.

"*Hola* dude," the little Puerto Rican said when he realized who it was. "Where's it hanging? Hy's worried 'bout you."

"Yeah, well she's not the only one. She there?"

"Nah, she's off grabbing some candy."

"Can you have her call me back?"

"Sure. You in trouble, man?"

"Just get her to call, T. She knows it's important." I disconnected and kept walking. Loitering only invited someone to

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

call in a suspicious presence. Angelenos still remembered the night Manson and his ghouls had brought their hippy horror to this upscale neighborhood. Angeleno memory was long that way.

After crossing Franklin, I passed a taco shack where a few drifters hung out, though nothing in the area was open. I saw and avoided a couple of tweakers I'd had dealings with before and did a three-sixty when one of them waved frantically at me. I had a pocketful of rock, and they had cash in need of a home, so we made a fair trade. I now had enough cash in my pocket to grab a cheap room to crash for the next twenty-four. All I needed was a way to find one as far from here as I could get.

Cash safely tucked away in my front pocket snug against my balls, I kept strolling down Western. When I started scoping out cars, I didn't think much of it at first. Then I realized where my mind was going. I checked my borrowed cell, but I hadn't missed a call from Hyacinth. If she got stoned enough, I knew she wouldn't call. Or Taz might forget to give her my message. I couldn't wait forever.

I had to get out of Dodge and fast. Realizing that, I started looking more closely at parked cars. I didn't have my slim jim with me, so I was going to have to find a car that wasn't locked. Still surprisingly easy.

It took me only ten minutes of sidling up to cars and testing doors before I found one that opened. Finally, success. I slipped inside and took out my slide pull, which I had stuffed in my pocket earlier. I screwed the device into the ignition lock. Then I slid back the weighted pull, and the lock popped off. I replaced the slide pull with a flat-head screwdriver and fired up the engine. Maybe twenty seconds had passed. I was rusty, my reflexes slow. I used to be able to do it in ten. Once the car was rolling down Western, I

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

jammed the single set of house keys I still had into the slot. I didn't want a cop, driving by, to see a car with no keys.

Within another minute I was rolling down Western, where I hooked a left on Sunset and headed east. I stopped at the first liquor store I hit and grabbed a six-pack of Bud, then drove on, stopping at the second shabby looking motel that crossed my path. It was a rundown, single-story, cinder-block-and-stucco building in need of a paint job and a demolition crew. But my green was good, and I was soon standing under my second shower of the night. This one wasn't as enjoyable as the first one, nor was it followed by a pleasurable grope. I cranked on the AC and received a blast of warm air for my trouble. The unit clanked and rattled before settling into a cranky rumble. It continued to pour out tepid air.

After two beers I was yawning, and after checking that the door was locked and the chain was in place, I rolled under the threadbare cover and slipped into an uneasy, nightmare-filled sleep.

Dawn came and went. I crawled out of bed sometime in late morning when a car horn blasted past the sound of the struggling AC. It was even hotter in the room now that the sun was streaming through a pair of dirty windows barely covered by wispy curtains. A fly buzzed against the pane, the sound irritating enough to set my head to throbbing.

Uncapping my fourth beer, I guzzled the warm contents and fell back across the bed, knowing I had to get up eventually and figure out what I was going to do. This life as a fugitive sucked, and I knew if I didn't get a plan in place soon, I might as well drive my stolen car down to the West Hollywood station and turn myself in.

Feeling thoroughly sorry for my busted ass, I started on beer

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

number five. Maybe I should have bought two six-packs. I had enough money left to spend another night in this dump, or I could have seen if I had enough gas in the car to get out of town. And go where? What a joke. I might have had enough to get me to the border, though Canada would have been a better choice than Mexico. Despite a lifetime in Cali, I'd never learned more than a rudimentary Spanish. Enough to get laid, enough to get a blow job, which wasn't going to do me much good right now. Besides, I'd heard folks in Canada didn't like the American penchant for issuing the death penalty and were reluctant to extradite in capitol murder cases. I could have easily made the case that California wanted me in Pelican Bay and already had the needle with my name on it.

Markie said I was still good for the crime, and with the news throwing out adjectives like "carnage and blood bath," I could see some gung-ho prosecutor desperately wanting to make a political name for himself and throwing the book at the proverbial loser I had become. No way I wanted to end up in the dead man's walkway on the wrong end of the needle. My mother's favorite son—well, let's be honest, my mother's only son—did not deserve that.

I stretched out on the bed, hoping sleep would find me. Whatever I decided to do, I needed my wits about me tomorrow. I closed my eyes and willed myself to sleep.

There was a furious pounding at the door. I think my heart stopped for five seconds, then resumed with a solid whump that took my breath away. I looked around frantically. No back door. My earlier trip to the bathroom had revealed a bathroom window too small even for my slender tush.

I was going to ignore the sound, hoping it was housekeeping,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

when the pounding came again, this time louder. If I didn't answer it, I'd find someone coming through the door without an invitation. Jesus, even maids have no respect anymore. Besides, since when did places like this have energetic maids?

I slid along the wall, peering out the grimy window, but the angle didn't tell me who was at my door. I could see part of the parking lot. No squad of cop cars or SWAT teams waited for me with lights flashing and battering rams. I doubted a single cop would come after a man accused of creating so much carnage and mayhem. So maybe this wasn't an official visit.

The fist pounded one more time. I threw the bolt and jerked open the door to face the full fury of all six feet, nine inches of Hyacinth. I stepped back from her ferocity, and she took advantage of my lapse to push past me into the room, which was suddenly way too small. Taz followed Hy's designer-shod heels.

"Hon, what—"

"Don't you hon me. What the hell has gotten into you, boy, and why didn't you stick tight until I called you back?" She was in my face, her glittering sparkling eyes and blood-red shiny lips inches from mine. I could smell something like vanilla and Chanel No 5. Her dragon-length nails dug into my bare arm.

"Ouch," I said weakly and tried to pull away from her.

"What have you gotten yourself into, J-Man? The cops been buzzing around the Loro since yesterday. Sid's about ready to chew you a new one, and you know that ain't a pretty picture."

"What'd you do, man?" Taz asked. You'd think the diminutive Puerto Rican, who barely reached Hyacinth's shoulder, would be a non-presence. But over the years I'd known the pair, I'd found Taz to be a strong character in his own right. He didn't take shit from anyone, not even his dragon lady.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“It’s all messed up, man,” I said, thinking that was a hell of an understatement. Apparently they both agreed with me. “How’d you find me, anyway?”

“You don’t hide worth a shit,” Hyacinth said. “I knew you wouldn’t go far, and you had to go cheap. We’ve been banging on motel manager doors for the last two hours.”

“You lucky she so big no one refuses to tell her what she want,” Taz said, obviously trying to be helpful.

Hyacinth dropped her voice several octaves and stooped to peer into my face. “It true you were found with that poor boy out in WeHo?”

It was so gratifying not to hear her ask me if I’d killed that “poor boy,” like she already knew the answer to that. I blinked past a suddenly wetness in my eyes and realized just how much this whole mess had affected me.

“I was,” I said. “And the law johnnies want to pin it on me. They found my fingerprints in his blood...it was terrible, Hy. Really terrible.”

“You poor thing.” Hyacinth guided me to the rumpled bed and sat me down. She smoothed the hair off my face and patted my knee. “You are a mess, boy. Hy needs to take care of you.”

It might have been tempting to let her “take care of me,” but Johnny Wager didn’t let anyone—dragon, he/she, man or woman—take care of him. I shook her clawed hand off me. “Not much you can do, hon. I have to sort this out on my own. Markie thinks I’m innocent, so maybe the others will come around once cooler heads prevail.”

“You saw Markie? How’d that happen?”

I really didn’t want to get into the whole messed-up story of my flight from the motel room where Bunny had died to my disastrous

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

night with Tyler, porn filmmaker extraordinaire. Then it hit me: Bunny's death was supposedly punishment for snitching out a bootlegging operation. A movie bootlegging operation. Maybe there wasn't a big enough margin in porn to bootleg it, but Tyler might know the industry beyond his narrow field. Would he know any of the story behind this unmitigated disaster?

And was it worth pursuing and risking Tyler and his shaky gun hand?

Only one way to find out, but I had to do some things first.

"I did see Markie, and it doesn't really matter how right now. I have other things to take care of. But I could use your help, Hy." I glanced over at Taz, who was brimming with eagerness to do whatever it took to help me. Who could ask for better friends, right?

"I need to dump that car I, ah, borrowed last night and get myself some new threads. But I'm a bit light in the pocket. Can you help a brother?"

"Brother, my ass. You as pasty white as my sistah's husband, and he's from Biloxi, poor girl. What you need, boy? Clothes?" She tapped an acrylic talon against her chin. "I can't help you, you'd look silly in anything I wear, but I know who can help us." Her gaze lasered in on Taz. "Taz honey, first thing we need to do is move that cop magnet away from here. We don't want five-oh sniffing around us before we can take care of business."

"I'll do that now." Taz moved toward the door. "Which car is it?"

"The Cavalier at the end of the lot." I hadn't parked the thing outside my room or given the license plate to the desk clerk, but Hyacinth was right. It was a cop magnet.

"I'll move it across the river. Let the boys in the barrio take

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

care of business. Those wheels will be history by this time tonight.” He slipped out the door.

Hyacinth became all business. “Grab your gear, and let’s split. First stop, breakfast. I’ll bet you ain’t had the sense to fuel up since this mess started.”

She was right. Outside of the crackers and cheese I had shared at Tyler’s and the beer for breakfast, I hadn’t had anything to eat. She took me to a nearby coffee shop where I had a massive omelet stuffed with sausage, double onions, peppers, ham and cheese. I added a stack of toast and jam, and a gallon of coffee...and almost felt human when I wiped the last speck of yolk off my plate. She bore the scrutiny of the shop’s owner and didn’t participate in the feast.

Frowning at me, she said, “Good thing you live alone, sugar. Shoveling that crap in your face would drive even the horniest git out of bed.”

I rubbed my stomach. “Nothing drives them out of my bed, sugar. They don’t leave till they can’t walk a straight line.”

Hyacinth snorted, clearly happy my mood had been restored. She drove me west, stopping at a Goodwill. I picked up two pairs of jeans and shirts and a hoodie, which made me feel like a gang banger when I slipped it on and pulled the hood up over my light-colored hair.

“You blend now,” she said in satisfaction.

I stroked my arms under the long sleeves. “Need a few tats to go along with that image.”

“Wouldn’t want you ruining that perfect body.”

She kept flirting with me as we returned to her car. There she went through the glove compartment and handed me a charger unit. “Forgot to give you this when I gave you the phone. Find

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

someplace to plug it in.” Then she slipped two centuries into my hand. “Where you gonna go?”

“Haven’t decided yet. Maybe the Valley. Hide out in Chatsworth for a while. Or maybe go to the beach.”

“Chatsworth? You think I’m driving out to Chatsworth? Even for you? Forget that.”

“Okay, the beach then. Venice.”

“You really think this shit’s going to blow over?”

“It has to. I didn’t do anything. The cops have to figure that out sometime.”

She shook her wigged head, but didn’t disabuse me of the belief I clung to. I had to believe in something, right?

One more stop at a bathroom where I changed into my new clothes. I folded everything I wasn’t wearing and shoved the bundle in the trunk of Hyacinth’s Kia. I tied the arms of the hoodie around my waist. It was too hot to wear it now, but after nightfall, the beach could get cool. Wishing I’d picked up some shades, I splashed some water on my face and rinsed out my mouth, conscious of Hyacinth’s comments about my breath. Not that I expected to get close enough to anyone to make it a problem.

She came out of the liquor store with a bottle of something that sloshed in a paper bag. At my look, she smiled. “Taz and I are having a picnic up in the park later on. A little alone time. You’re looking slick.”

I had chosen the more casual of the shirts I’d found at Goodwill. It was a yellow, blue and green Hawaiian shirt. With my slightly scruffy, uncombed hair and unshaved face, I appeared to be a beach bum. No one was going to look sideways at me.

The beach was midday crowded with the usual frenzied mishmash of skateboarders, bladers, people watchers and tourists

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

with their cameras. A woman flew by on the boardwalk, towed by a trio of harnessed Dobermans. They worked as smoothly as any team of horses I've ever seen, dodging in and out of startled pedestrians. I kept expecting her or her dogs to crash into someone and end up in a heap of broken limbs. Somebody else was filming the whole thing. I made a mental note to stay out of the camera eye. God, was I being paranoid or what?

Hyacinth parked the Kia, and we got out. I sauntered onto the boardwalk; she trailed after me. She was way overdressed for the beach and drew a lot of eyes, not all of them amused. One muscle-bound asshole bladed by and muttered loud enough for us to hear: "Freak."

Hyacinth ignored him. I imagine she got that all the time. She was an in-your-face drag queen who didn't care who didn't like it. I knew for a fact she's been beat up more than once. Once, I found her in a dark corner of the Loro Azul, her lip split, her wig a rat's nest over a bloody scalp. Even then she had refused medical help and would barely allow me to bring out paper towels dipped in warm water to clean her up. Nobody suggested we call the cops. Taz came in an hour later looking even worse than she did, but with a fierce grin on his narrow face. All he said was, "I take care of them. *Pinche culero*."

Taking out the garbage at the end of the night, I had found the bloody knife under the Dumpster. I had used a scrap of newspaper to pick it up and bury it under a mass of rotting fat scraps from the *carnicería* next door. I never asked Taz about it, then or later. I figured he was just taking care of business.

I leaned my ass on the cement border beside the path. Hyacinth stood in front of me, her restless gaze scanning the beachfront.

"Nice day," she muttered, not sounding at all impressed. "I

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

have to get back. Taz is waiting.”

“I’m good. You go take care of your little man.”

“Hah, he not so little.”

“As long as he keeps you happy, sugar.”

“I’ll call you in a few hours. I can find a place for you to crash by then.”

“Thanks, Hy. I owe you.”

“Bet your skinny white ass you do.”

I watched her leave, then strolled toward the gray beach. Surfers still worked the waves off the pier, though they didn’t look very active. I had never been a surfer, but then a poor kid from the Valley didn’t spend a lot of time at the beach. I think my father and I made it down to Santa Monica maybe twice before he split and left me to the mercies of my mother.

I passed the first graffitied wall and entered the maze of paint-covered cement barriers that made up the Venice Art Wall. I came here occasionally. It was no MOCA, but it was free...always changing, always alive. The Doberman runner came back, blonde hair now plastered to the back of her neck and cheeks, the dogs still moving with strong, steady strides.

After a couple of hours people-watching—well, let’s be honest, man-watching—the cell trilled. I pulled it out. It was Hyacinth. She sounded harried and rushed, not her usual carefree spirit. I wondered what was stressing her out.

“Got a place for you,” she said in a rush. “It’s only for a few days, but the guy’s kosher.”

“Where?”

“Uh, I’ll tell you when I pick you up.”

“Someone I know?”

“No.” She said it curtly. “I don’t, uh, think so. Do you want my

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

help or not?”

I found all the cloak-and-dagger shit irritating, but she *was* trying to help, so I let it go. “Thanks, Hy. I won’t forget this.”

“No,” she snapped. “You won’t. Meet me in three hours, at seven-thirty, at the *taqueria* up on the Boulevard. You know the one.”

She disconnected. So I had another three hours to kill. With that much time on my restless hands, I hit the nearest bar, where I used some of Hyacinth’s cash to buy a couple of Dos Equis. Out of habit, I spent the time cruising the local candy, but got no hits, bringing back to me why I don’t spend much time at the beach these days. The competition was brutal. Who needed the reminder that age was catching up faster than I could run?

The sun was in front of me now, sliding toward the distant, hazy horizon. I downed the last beer and left a tip for the cute waiter I’d spent the last fifteen minutes eye-fucking with no luck, and hit the sand, heading south again.

It was still hours before sunset, but the day was ending, and I was no closer to getting out of this trap. I knew I had to call Markie—Mark. But I preferred waiting until he was off shift. No way I wanted to carry on a private conversation with him surrounded by his fellow cops.

I moved from the shadow of the art wall and walked across the loose-shifting sand, too lazy to take off my shoes. Ahead of me, a cluster of giggling teen boys paused to watch me. I ignored them. Jail bait was one hassle I could do without. Instead, I watched the oiled, testosterone-built bodies of the too-good-to-be-true hunks who made muscle beach their public forum for hedonism.

A scented breeze came off the water, rich with the stink of rotting fish, coconut oil and salt. Gulls swooped over the beach

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

goers, seeking out food, fighting over the scraps of French fries and hot dog buns thrown to them. Offshore, a sailboat moved south toward Marina del Rey.

Finally, I flipped open the phone and punched in Markie's home number from memory.

He snatched it up so fast, it was like he was standing beside his phone. I knew he'd been waiting for someone else to call.

"Sorry, it's just me."

"Dad," he said in flat tones. "What?"

I didn't know what to say now that I had him on the line. "Ah, has anything come up in the investigation?"

"Do you mean have we arrested anyone, yet? No."

"They still want me for it?"

"What do you think?"

That I'm easier than putting some real work into this thing. "Is that the way this is going to go down?"

"For now."

"And what am I supposed to do while you sort this out? I can't go back to work. I can't even go home. Am I suppose to leave the fucking city?"

"You do what you gotta do, Dad. You always did."

"Yeah, I guess I did." I gripped the small phone so tight, it was a wonder my hand didn't crush it. "You have no idea how sorry I am that I was such a lousy father. I never meant to be—"

"I think it's pretty obvious you never should have been anyone's father." His voice was heavy with bitterness and regret, something I'd never expected to hear from him. He was usually so stoic about everything. The last bastion of machismo...show no pain, give no mercy. "You never should have messed up my mother's life. If you hadn't spent your life pretending—"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“You think I wanted it this way? I wanted to be straight. Do you have any idea what it’s like to be a goddamn faggot in high school? Try to imagine.”

“I can’t. Okay?”

“No, you can’t.” I spun around, staring blindly out at the Pacific Ocean. Watching breakers curl over the sand, sinking into it and vanishing, only to be replaced by the next one. The endless repetition was somehow soothing. So why did I have a headache? “I thought I had a chance to be normal when I was with your mother. It didn’t work out, and I had to stop kidding myself. So here we are.” I took a deep breath. “The question is, where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know, Dad.”

It occurred to me I didn’t know anything about my son’s life beyond the bald fact he was a cop with ambitions I thought might be unrealistic. Was he seeing anyone? Had he ever been in love? He was that age when a lot of men get married and start their own families. Gack, he could make me a grandfather.

“Have you told your mother anything?”

“Tell her what? She watches the news. I don’t think there’s anyone in the city who doesn’t know.”

Which meant it was rough for him. Son of a man accused of such a horrendous crime. Could I do anything right by Markie?

Yeah. Die.

The thought hit me like bricks dropped on me from a second-story window. I couldn’t breathe. I knew if the police caught me, it might be a state option...not that the death penalty was much of a threat in Cali these days. There were people sitting on death row, but it had been years since anyone had been executed.

But of all the things I’d been in my life, suicidal had never been

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

one of them. Even in my darkest moments when despair ate at me, I hadn't thought dying would be an easy way out. I didn't want to die.

But I could make a life, of sorts, in prison. Mind you, the longest time I'd ever spent behind bars was the eighteen months I did in Corcoran. And that was a deal I'd cut with the DA to rat out Big-C, the guy who had helped me boost a dozen cars before we got shit-canned in a sting the LAPD set up just to get us.

I had survived the time served and had come out fifteen months earlier, determined not to go back. So far, I had managed to keep that vow, if only by the skin of my teeth—mostly by not getting caught again.

I've spent most of my life living on the edge. Surviving on my wits and a lot of luck. And when that luck ran out? I could wait for them to catch me and make the decision for me. Or I could choose a new path. One that might even redeem me in some small way.

I knew what I had to do. I closed my eyes and opened them to stare out at the astonishingly blue surf. I'd never really noticed how beautiful it was before. Over the hard-packed sand, I watched a pair of young boys playing with a volleyball, tossing it back and forth, so thoroughly entranced by the game that they had no awareness of anyone else around them. The vision brought back memories of Mark at that age. Jolene and I had taken him to Santa Monica only because Jolene nagged me for a week to get them out of the house. Mark had been maybe five or six, out of school for the summer, and a wild handful who drove both of us crazy.

It had been the last year we were together as a family.

We had caught the bus out of Hollywood, and I had spent the day either cruising the bathroom, where I had landed a blowjob from a cute lifeguard, or scoping out the parking lot for hot wheels.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

When I spotted the 1990 Accord, I knew I had to take it. Big-C always paid premium on them since the resale value on their parts was so high. I was inside the thing with the engine fired up before I had a chance to think about what I was doing. I had driven the car off the lot, parked it in a narrow alley off Pacific, still running, and gone back to get Jolene and the kid. Mark hadn't wanted to leave, but I bundled them into the car, ignoring Jolene's protests and nosy questions, and drove them home, dumping them on the front step and hurrying to Big-C's chop shop. He handed me the century we'd agreed on for cars of that caliber.

Memories flooded back. Mark's disappointment at the day being cut short, Jolene's fury when she realized what I had done. My euphoria at successfully boosting yet another set of wheels. And the blowjob that had curled my toes in the bathroom stall. With shame, I remembered bracing myself on the stall door while this kid, barely out of his teens, had blown me probably less than five yards from where my son built sandcastles with his plastic shovel and bright red pail. Oh, yeah, father of the year there, for sure.

God, I really was a loser.

And there was only one way to make up for it.

"I want you to come get me," I said, silencing another Markie diatribe against my wasted life.

He was quiet so long, I thought he'd hung up on me.

"What did you say?"

"I want you to come out and get me."

"I can't do that. I can't help you anymore, Dad. I won't put my job on the line for you. You can't ask that of me. Not this time."

"I'm not asking you to put anything on the line. I want to turn myself in. But only to you."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Turn...are you nuts? You’re wanted on a felony homicide charge. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, I do.” I went over and sat on a stone bench facing muscle beach, forcing myself to go on. I’d made my decision. I wanted to get it over with. “Come and get me. I won’t resist. But do me a favor, come alone. No other cops, no partner. Can you do that?”

“Why are you doing this, Dad? I don’t—”

“I can spend the rest of my life telling you how fucking sorry I am to have made such a mess of my life and yours, but none of that means jack shit if I don’t do something to make amends. I can’t keep running. I’m too tired, Mark. Maybe I’m just getting too fucking old. I want it over.”

“I wanted you to straighten up,” Markie whispered. “But not like this. You know even with a plea bargain you’re looking at life.”

“I know. But don’t you think that’s better all around?”

“I don’t think I want to do this, Dad. Don’t ask me to.”

“I am asking you. I’ll be waiting at the taco truck on Pacific in two hours. Come alone.” I disconnected before he could protest any more, and before I could chicken out of my resolve. I’d never done very much for him or Jolene. I could manage this without screwing up too badly.

I left the boardwalk and headed toward the rendezvous point. Along the way, I passed a brightly colored, raucous beach bar. Well, no way Mark was going to arrive in less than a half hour, probably longer with traffic this time of day. I decided to spend the money I had left. Inside, I climbed onto the bar stool and laid a fifty in front of the bartender. “Tequila. Keep it coming. I’m not driving.”

He raised one dark eyebrow and stared down at the money,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

then up at me. Finally, he shrugged and grabbed a bottle off the bottom shelf behind him. I thought of telling him to at least give me the good stuff, then decided it didn't matter. After the first half-dozen, I was going to be shitfaced, anyway. He filled a shot glass and slid it over the bar at me, setting the three-quarters-full bottle in front of me. It sloshed invitingly, the golden elixir of forgetfulness.

"Lime?"

"Keep that coming, too."

Between the sharp acidity of the lime and the burn of rotgut tequila, my mouth was aflame. "Damn good thing I don't smoke," I muttered as I poured the sixth—or was it seventh—shot down my throat. "I'd blow us all up."

"You want to talk about it, buddy?"

"Nothing to talk about, my man." I raised the next shot glass, admiring the viscous golden liqueur that gently spilled over my fingers. For some reason, my hand was shaking. "Just celebrating a wasted life."

"No life's wasted, man," he said.

"You don't know mine."

I tried to think through the fuzz my mind had become, to remember if there was someone else I should call. The fact there was no one was so depressing, I poured another shot. I was going to feel like shit tomorrow, but then considering I'd be in county lockup waiting for some PD to come around and accept my plea bargain, it would be fitting.

I'd have to ask Hyacinth if she and Taz would visit me.

Would Mark?

If he didn't, that would hurt more than the prospect of long-term incarceration. I looked at the wall clock. It was barely seven

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

o'clock. I'd have to leave soon to meet Hyacinth and Mark. I hoped Hy would get there first so I'd have time to explain what I was doing. I knew she wouldn't understand, but she wouldn't fight me on it. That wasn't her style. I expected more argument from Mark.

I stood up to go to the bathroom. My head spun. With a "whoa," I grabbed the bar and the back of my chair and waited for it to pass. The bathroom was way too bright. I was alone and stumbled into a stall, thumping the door shut behind me. Without pulling down my jeans, I slumped onto the toilet seat and buried my head in my hands.

I couldn't do this. I should leave. Mark would be pissed, but I doubted he'd be surprised. I'd only be living up—or down—to his expectations of me. Hyacinth never expected anything from anyone, so she wouldn't be surprised.

I lunged up and threw open the stall door, startling the young Hispanic who stood over the urinal. He tucked himself back into his skintight jeans and gave me the once-over with very interested eyes.

"*Hola*," he said.

"Hey." Maybe I wouldn't be leaving just yet. Without breaking eye contact, I stepped back into the stall, gratified when he followed. I sat back on the toilet seat and reached for him.

With a sigh, he thrust his hips forward and unzipped himself. "*Chupame la verga*," he muttered. Now that was Spanish I could understand. I rolled my mouth over the thick cock rising out of its nest of coarse black hair. He steadied himself with his hands gripping my shoulders and rumbled in his throat when I swallowed his cock to the root. Normally, I'd insist on a condom or a dental dam, but maybe I could shorten my prison stay and make myself

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

untouchable while I was there. Nothing like disease to keep the rapists at bay.

I reached between his legs and squeezed his fat brown balls, rolling them between my thumb and fingers, tugging on them. He groaned, clutching my Aloha shirt in his fists and pumping his prick down my throat. With a grunt he came, his fingers leaving bruises on my shoulders.

He backed away; I turned and spat on the floor. Without a word, he let himself out of the stall, and I heard the outer door swing open and shut. I sat there for several seconds, then stood, swaying. Steadying myself on the toilet paper dispenser, I staggered out, returning to the bar. The Hispanic boy was gone. So was my fifty and the bottle of tequila. The bartender watched me approach.

“You’ve had enough,” he said.

I nodded. “You have no idea.” I tightened the hoodie around my waist. “Keep the change.”

The sun was still descending, and I wished for sunglasses yet again. Instead, I had to be content with shading my eyes with my hand. I made my way toward Pacific Avenue. The *taqueria* was about half a block east.

I staggered through the crowds that massed on the sidewalk, bouncing off elbows and separating couples, leaving a wake of angry people behind me. Maybe I was hoping someone would take a pop at me. Give me an excuse to whale on them. It would have been nice to use up some of this pent-up energy. Didn’t happen.

I crossed Pacific at Venice Boulevard, moving toward the parking lot on the northeast corner. No sign of Hyacinth or Mark.

An even thicker crowd gathered around the *taqueria* set up in the parking lot beside the Grand Canal. Some folks clutched drink

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

cups and boxes of greasy food. The air was redolent with cilantro, cinnamon and hot oil. I was still full of lime and tequila. The scent of food did nothing for me. But I knew I needed to drink. I'd be dehydrated enough in the morning, and God knew when anyone would give me a drink after I was taken into custody. Even with a confession, they might still sweat me just because they could. If they pushed hard enough, maybe they could even solve the Lindberg baby kidnapping once and for all, or nail Jimmy Hoffa's killer.

After getting a jumbo Coke, I drifted toward the canal, one eye on the road. Would Mark come in a patrol car? Make it official? Or would he try to talk me into changing my mind again? I also watched for Hyacinth's Kia. I glanced at my watch. It was seven-twenty.

A black and white cruised down Pacific. I followed it, trying to see who was driving. When I realized the driver was female, I turned away. With the sun down in the western sky, the canal waters that flowed between the stone and bush-lined channels were dark and tranquil. I remembered in past days when they stank and were full of garbage. The area had gotten a lot prettier since the day I boosted a car and ruined my son's day at the beach.

My back was to the parking lot, and I studied the pretty pastel houses that crowded the canal, brilliant flashes of bright red bougainvillea and hibiscus and violet morning glories climbing everything in sight. A trio of brown pelicans flew overhead toward the open ocean.

Gravel crunched behind me, and I spun around. A patrol car with "Sheriff" on the side door panel slowed and stopped behind me. Mark was at the wheel. He stepped out of the vehicle, wearing his khaki uniform and Sam Browne belt, his badge pinned to his

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

chest. My own chest grew tight, and it was hard to suck in air. He slid on a pair of sunglasses and walked toward me.

I didn't move. My last moments of freedom. I wanted to savor them. Movement caught my eye, and I turned and watched a white heron fly low over the surface of the canal. A pair of ducks took off with a noisy whirl of wings when a small, brightly colored canoe drifted by. A young couple waved at me as they paddled by. Behind me, I heard children squealing and somewhere a sound like a calliope rode the soft air. A faint breeze stirred the hair on the back of my neck.

Mark came to stand beside me. "You ready to do this?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes."

"You know I have to cuff you. You can't go in to be booked without them on."

"I know. It's okay. Just...do it after we leave here, okay?"

He shifted uneasily on the cracked pavement. He reached out as though to touch me, then pulled back. "Come on," he growled. "Let's go."

I glanced back toward the *taqueria*. Still no sign of Hyacinth. Where was that girl? Oh well, too late to worry about that now. She'd have to find out on her own what had gone down. I didn't doubt street gossip would have the word to her in a very short time.

I squared my shoulders and straightened. "Yes."

We both turned toward his patrol car. Mark held open the passenger door. I guess he was going to let me ride up front for part of the trip. He ducked down to clear something off the seat, and I took one last look for Hyacinth. Nowhere in sight. Damn it, girlfriend—

The concussive boom eclipsed the sounds of children shouting and the carnival that was going on down Main Street. Then I was

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

flying, riding on a wall of air that carried me out over the green lip of the canal. Pale, startled faces and a bright red canoe flashed by under me, and a second, softer *crump* shuddered through my airborne frame seconds before the water of the canal closed over my head. I opened my mouth to yell, only to get a mouthful of salt water.

CHAPTER 9

Choking and gasping, I lunged toward the surface. Or what I hoped was the surface. My fingers scrabbled against rough stone. Savage pain ripped through me as I tore off a fingernail in my growing panic. My lungs screamed for air, and I almost succumbed to the need to breathe when I broke through the surface. Cold water sloshed over my face as I struggled to keep my mouth and nose above the rolling waves.

Treading water, I looked around frantically. Where the hell was I? What had happened? A dull ringing in my ears was the only sound I could hear. I couldn't even make out the slap of water against the nearby rock wall. There was a curious numbness encasing my head. I splashed my way toward shore, opening my mouth to shout at the figure who appeared in front of me.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

It was Markie. I don't think I'd ever seen him look so disheveled. Or scared. He crouched at the edge of what, I belatedly realized, was the Grand Canal I'd been standing beside when... When what? What the hell had just happened?

I realized Markie was shouting at me. I could see his lips moving, but no sound came out. A cocoon of silence enveloped me. Someone came up behind me. I looked around and found the couple in the canoe gliding up to the stone wall. Rough hands grabbed my shoulders, and I was unceremoniously dragged up on shore where I lay gasping and flopping like a beached seal.

Finally, I found my voice, though when I spoke it was like talking from the bottom of a deep well. I still couldn't hear anything but a ringing and an internal roar like when you listen for the ocean with a conch shell held up to one ear.

Markie leaned over me, his face looking frantic and scared. His lips moved, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I frowned and tried to speak again. I reached up to touch his face. He had a scratch on his cheek, and his hair looked like someone had seriously fucked with it. When I saw the rip on the arm of his uniform, I knew something bad was going down. Markie never let even a crease settle out of place on his pants.

"What happened?" I croaked. This time I could actually hear my voice, a foghorn of sound. I started coughing then, and twisted out of his grasp to double over and heave a messy pile of tequila, Coke and sea water onto the pavement at his feet. He didn't step away in disgust. Instead, he held my shoulders while I emptied my stomach beside his once spit-and-polished military boots.

Slowly I grew aware of sounds around me. Two voices, presumably the couple in the canoe, were crying and asking, "What happened? What was that? What's going on?"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Mark answered as calmly as he could, his cop voice kicking in. “I don’t know. Ah, here, help is coming. They’ll sort it out.”

Then I could hear sirens in the distance that grew in urgency as they drew near. Finally, I could hear distant wordless screams and cries, and an ominous crackle.

I raised my head and stared toward the sounds.

Greasy, black-and-white smoke roiled from a tangle of white metal and plastic. I could make out pieces of debris scattered around the parking lot. Not two yards away, I saw fragments of words I recognized—*cemitas poblan, picos, sope*—but had no idea what it meant. I saw my first body, an untidy heap of legs and arms twisted at unnatural angles. Nearby, another form, this one dressed in the outfit worn by the guy who had sold me my Coke a few minutes before. Only his once-white clothes were blackened and smoldering. I couldn’t see his face. I was suddenly very thankful for that. Behind him, a new, incomprehensible horror. At first my mind insisted it was a doll dropped by one of the children I had seen heard earlier. Until I recognized blood. From the flowered dress, I knew it was a little girl. I lost it then.

When I grew aware again, I was sitting on the ground with my head between my knees. Mark’s hand was on the back of my neck, forcing me to bend over. I was still breathing in short gulps of air that weren’t helping to clear my head.

“Take a deep breath. Take another one.”

I obeyed, mostly because I didn’t know what else to do. After several seconds, the breathing seemed to be working. I staggered to my feet and made myself look around. And regretted it immediately.

More and more bodies forced their way into my awareness, despite my attempts to ignore them. The sirens grew nearer, the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

sound taking on an hysterical edge. I shook off Markie's solicitous hand and sat down hard on the pavement, barely feeling the rough surface under my butt. A bolt of pain shot through my back, and my head spun. I thought I was going to wretch again, though this time not from the sea water I had inhaled. The stench of cooking meat lodged in my nose, and I knew without conscious thought that it was the smell of cooking human flesh.

Markie's hands kept trying to push down my head. Gradually, I grew aware of his hoarse whispers and his urgency. "Dad. Dad. Lie down. The ambulance will be here soon. Don't try to move—"

I raised my face to meet his gaze. He was pale, and his lips looked puffy. The scrape on his cheek bled copiously, dripping down his throat and staining his uniform. I knew it would be a bitch to clean. Blood always resisted cleaning. I wanted to tell him he needed to wipe it off before it stained even more. The words wouldn't come.

"Dad? Can you hear me? Talk to me. Dad!"

"What...what happened?" The words were little more than a hoarse whisper.

Instead of saying he didn't know again, Mark looked over his shoulder and a grimness I had never seen in him closed down his face. "An explosion of some kind. Gas leak, maybe."

Even as he spoke, three fire trucks roared onto the lot, followed by two more. Then the ambulances appeared. I blinked and looked over at the sheriff's black and white that Mark had arrived in, that he had been taking me to when this shit—whatever this shit was—had happened. The vehicle was a smoking wreck. Something large and heavy had smashed into the roof, twisting it like a soda can under someone's heel. It looked vaguely like a propane tank buried in the mangled black and white.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Mark seemed to know where my thoughts were going. His fingers closed over my arm. He forced my attention away from the wrecked car and back to him.

“Do you understand me, Dad?” His hand closed over my chin, and he leaned down until his mouth was inches from my ears. “Say something. Let me know you’re okay.”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but only a croak emerged. Still, the relief that washed over his face was painful to see.

The couple from the canoe appeared beside us. She knelt, completely unaware of the stone and shattered glass under her denim jeans. She had a mole on her left cheek and for some reason, I was mesmerized by it. Anything to avoid looking at the bodies that littered what had been a parking lot full of laughing, hungry people.

I was soaking wet, and with the sun gone from the sky, I was shivering. Mark pulled off his uniform jacket and draped it over my shoulders. It didn’t help. My teeth chattered and shudders rolled through my whole body as the ambulance pulled beside us. A pair of EMTs jumped out and hustled around performing EMT duties. Theirs were the first authoritative voices I had heard since the explosion. I was grateful to leave myself in their capable hands.

While they looked me over, Mark went to his ruined car and from the trunk pulled out a thermal blanket, which he wrapped around my shoulders once the EMTs had declared me shaken but fit. By this time, word had spread, and people crowded around us, telling us the latest scuttlebutt.

“Bomb,” said one of the LAPD cops who had drifted over when he spotted Mark’s uniform. “The bomb squad is on its way, but it looks like an explosive was rigged with a timer under the propane tank on the truck.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

A timer? Set for just the moment when I was meant to arrive at the truck to meet Hyacinth. I felt ice in my veins, and my shivering renewed so badly the blanket and Mark's jacket fell off my shoulders. He tucked it back around and held it there.

"What is it, Dad? Maybe you do need to go to the hospital with these guys."

I was tempted, but I suddenly knew I couldn't do that. Once at the hospital, my identity would be found out, and this time it would be a different deputy who came to arrest me, without the cozy deal Mark and I had concocted.

And just as suddenly, I knew I couldn't go to jail right now. If my suspicions were right, I suddenly had unfinished business to take care of first. Because I now suspected that this bomb hadn't been a coincidence or an accident. It had been a deliberate attempt to silence me, and maybe Mark, now that he believed in my innocence. But could I make Mark see that?

"No," I said. "I'd be a sitting duck in the hospital. More so, if I get tossed into jail."

"Sitting—what do you think happened here, Dad?" But I could see on his face that he knew. His face went white. "Who knew you were going to be here? I know I didn't tell anyone."

"Neither did I—" Then I froze, and my eyes went wide. "Except Hy. And Taz probably knew. Taz knows everything Hy does."

"Hy? Taz? Who are they?"

"People I thought I knew," I muttered. It couldn't be true. There had to be another explanation. Maybe it *had* been a gas leak. An accident. No way it could be a deliberate attempt to silence Mark and me from getting to the bottom of Bunny's murder and the Armenian mob connection. Could even the Armenians be so

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

ruthless that they'd kill dozens of innocents just to take out two, not-so-innocent people? Mark had said they were even more merciless than the Mafia. So maybe they could.

Because nobody else could have known where I was going to be today. I hadn't even known until Hyacinth had driven me out here a few hours before. And even if someone knew I was going to be at the beach, how did they know I was going to be *here*, at this time?

Round and round in my head the questions ran. And no matter how I spun them, they came back with only one answer. Hyacinth.

This time I was sick.

Mark held my head as I vomited foul-tasting bile. When I was done, I wiped my mouth on the sopping sleeve of my hoodie, not hiding the tears on my face.

"Jesus, Dad. You need to go to the hospital. You might have internal damage."

"I know what's wrong with me, and it's not because of some explosion." I stood up and shook off his hand. I looked from his face, so eerily like a younger, more honorable me, down to the sidearm at his side. "You can force me to go in with you. I can't stop you. But if you do, I'm a dead man, and I don't think that's what you really want."

He knew I wasn't just angling to stay out of jail. "What are you going to do?"

"Go talk to a man about movies," I said. "And go find someone who had better have an explanation for this."

He grabbed my arm when I began marching past him. "If you think you know who is responsible for this, you better tell me."

"You want to know who did this, come with me."

He glanced back at the ruined patrol car. "You know I can't do

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

that. I have to report this. Maybe once I get the paperwork done on this mess, I can do what you want.” He narrowed his eyes. “What *do* you want? Who the hell do you think did this?”

I didn’t want to think it was Hyacinth. I had to see her before I started throwing around accusations. I could do that better without Mark and the brown-shirted arm of the law hanging around.

“First, I need you to call the dogs off me. I need to get back to my territory, to track her down. And no, I can’t tell you who she is, at least not until I know for sure she was involved somehow.”

“Once you know that, you plan on telling me?”

“Yes, if she did this, or was instrumental in causing it, then even I won’t protect her. But I have to know before I take that step. Please try to understand. If I’m wrong...” Except, I knew I wasn’t. So why couldn’t I just tell Mark who I suspected and let him handle it with all his cop resources?

Because Hy and I had been friends for too long. The pain of her betrayal ate at me, but I had to know why. I had to see her face when I asked. Then I would throw her to Mark, and let her face the consequences.

Mark didn’t like it, but there was precious little he could do about it right now, short of busting me, and now he knew what that would mean.

Still, he was loath to let me go. “You said something about going to see a man about the movies? You don’t mean the porn guy in Los Feliz?”

“Yeah, him,” I said dryly. “Don’t worry, we won’t talk about you, though I can’t guarantee he won’t want to know about it later on.”

Mark went pale. “You...tell me you didn’t?” He all but begged me to tell him I hadn’t seen him fucking Lola.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

"I saw it. You want to tell me what you were thinking?"

He stared at the cracked ground at his feet. He looked like the little kid in trouble, who used to give me and Jolene that face while he tried to sweet-talk his way out of punishment. Not that I had been any master of discipline. Jolene had been better and more consistent at that than I had been. The wonder wasn't that he'd turned out to be such a good kid, but that he had done it in spite of me.

Was I about to ruin everything he had accomplished?

"I know it was a bad move," he said. "I had some bills after the Academy, and this guy said I could make a quick buck doing it. I only did one. The asshole lied and said it would never play here. Said they were for foreign distribution only."

"And you believed them?" Was he really that naïve? Apparently. "Well, it's not illegal."

"But it would screw up my chances of advancement. And no way the LAPD would hire me," he said bitterly.

"Hey, help me crack this case, and maybe your bosses won't care. You can always claim you were, ah, going undercover to get answers..."

"You think?" He clearly didn't share my sentiment. One thing he didn't get from me is a sense of the ridiculous, which I had in bucketfuls. He was more like his mother that way...no sense of humor. He pulled a cell phone off his belt and flipped it open. "Right now, I better come up with a good reason why I'm all the way out here in time to lose a unit. That is not going to impress anyone."

"Hey, tell them you had a hot tip about a fugitive, but he got away in the chaos. It's not even a lie. Really."

He grimaced and turned his back on me as he dialed his

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

superior. Soon he was talking with low-voiced urgency. I couldn't make out the words, but whatever he said must have worked. He put back the phone and took my elbow. "Come on, you have to get out of here. I have to wait for the supervisor and the tow truck. I'm going to be here a while."

I gave him the number of the disposable cell. He programmed it into his phone, and we parted. I would have to take transit back to Loro Azul, where I hoped to pick up Hyacinth's trail. I just wanted to do it without alerting either Hyacinth or Taz. Or worse, the one behind this butchery.

CHAPTER 10

I spent a miserable hour and ten minutes on the eastbound bus into L.A sandwiched between a fat Chinese man and a pair of boisterous teenage girls who never shut up the whole time. Now I remembered why I never took mass transit.

It was nearly nine-thirty by the time I reached Loro Azu. The night crowd was in full swing as I strode through the front doors and headed straight for the back bar. Tito was there slinging drinks and charming everyone who crossed silver over his palm. The consummate whore, Tito always kept the place jumping. His biggest problem and the reason he wasn't working a more upscale bar where his talents would really earn him some green, was his penchant for sixteen and seventeen-year-old boys. And his even worse habit of letting them into the bar to drink as long as they

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

were willing to service him. So far, the bar owner, Sid, had been kept in the dark about these peccadilloes, and I'd kept his ass out of jail on more than one occasion. I figured the guy owed me.

His face lit up when he saw me. "Hey, Wage, I heard you was in some trouble."

"Nothing I can't handle T-Lo."

"Not what I heard," Tito said in a low voice. "Heard five-oh got your scrote in a vise, and they want you for hard time."

"Forget that, man." I leaned over the bar. "You seen Hy or Taz lately?"

"Ain't seen Taz all day. Hy was just in."

"What time?" I wanted to shake him, to make him tell me what I needed without dragging it out of him. "What time was she here?"

"Hour, maybe less. Why?"

"She ask about me?"

"No, not a word. What's going on, Wage?"

"Nothing. You tell her if you see her again..." I considered what message I could give Hyacinth, then decided to be blunt. "Tell her the plan didn't work. Tell her you saw me in the flesh, and that means she fucked up. She needs to do better if she wants to make me disappear."

Tito looked puzzled at the obtuse message. But I knew he was good for delivering it. Tito never forgot to pass on things like that. Probably the main reason Sid kept him on.

"Just tell her, T-Lo. She'll understand."

"Ah, private stuff. I get it. Want a beer, man?"

"Love one, T, but duty calls first. I got a lady to find. Or, if I can't find her, a horny little Puerto Rican dog."

Tito was still totally confused when I slipped out of the bar

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

after polling everyone else there to see if they had seen Hy or Taz. Everyone had seen Hy around the same time as Tito, a few had seen her earlier in the day, but no one, it seemed, had seen Taz for hours. Was the little rat lying low, planning something? It was rare for the two of them to be apart for any serious length of time. Their devotion to each other was legendary.

I had hoped to use that by finding Taz and making him take me to Hy, or using him to lure Hy to me. But if I couldn't find Taz, where did that leave me?

I just might have to put this search on hold and go tackle my porn producer. I needed another car. Damn, this day was turning into one felony escapade after another. No wonder my own son had such a low opinion of me.

But what were my choices?

I could hardly cab it all over the city. That left records and trails, not to mention costing money I didn't have in abundance. I needed to travel under the cover of darkness and do my work in the best Angeleno way—from the anonymity of a car. Too bad it had to be someone else's. That's what insurance was for. I'd worry about my immortal soul some other day. No doubt anyone who knew me would tell me I was already destined for hell. A few more black marks were hardly going to tip the scales one way or another.

I found the perfect car, a nondescript POS Ford on Selma Avenue and had it on the road headed for Los Feliz in twelve seconds. I was getting the old groove back.

I dialed up KNAC and drummed a tattoo on the steering wheel along with Shockwave. Traffic this time of night was light, and I pulled onto Mount Beacon Terrace fifteen minutes later. I didn't dare leave the car on the street...the traffic nazis would come

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

along and scoop it up, or worse, find it was stolen and my ass would be green, green grass. I pulled off the street behind Tyler's BMW. The house was dark. Hopefully, he was in bed alone. I might be able to slide into the house if he was confused and half asleep.

But my hopes were dashed when the door swung open just as I raised my hand to grab the knocker.

And found myself staring down the barrel of a rifle, with a naked Tyler on the other end.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't blow your fucking head off."

CHAPTER 11

I flapped my gums and blinked at him, trying desperately to get a coherent thought through my sluggish, sleep-deprived, alcohol-addled mind. Seeing the patience drain from his pale face, I grew desperate.

“Don’t. For God’s sake, listen to me. Please. It’s not like you think...”

“You don’t know what I think.” He didn’t let up on the pressure he was bringing to bear on the rifle trigger. The twin bores of the blue steel rod were stinger-missile size.

“Please, Tyler. At least hear me out.”

“How did you get away? Did you escape?” He shook, and I closed my eyes, waiting for the blast I was sure I’d never hear or feel. “Did you do something to him? To your own son?”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“God, no!” I reared back, my hands flying up in denial. “God, you think I’d—no! Call him if you want. He’ll tell you he’s okay.”

“Why’d he let you go?”

“Because he knows I didn’t do it.”

That seemed to penetrate Tyler’s angry wall. He stepped back and lowered the rifle a fraction. But still, his eyes were wary. “Why would he think that?”

“Because it’s true. I didn’t do it.” I spread my arms, trying my damndest to look innocent and harmless. The harmless part was easy. I’d never felt less dangerous in my life. “I swear to you, I’ve never killed anyone.”

He wanted to believe me. Maybe it was as simple as he didn’t want to believe he could so eagerly bed a man who was a cold-blooded killer. Maybe some part of him liked me as much as I had started liking him.

“Can I come in? I promise I won’t stay...”

He wavered. Indecision, fear and even desire flashed across his butter-plain face. I took a deep breath when he finally stepped out of the doorway and let me pass him.

“Thank you,” I whispered when he shut and locked the door behind me.

He held the rifle ready, though his finger was no longer quite so close to the trigger. Still, I knew one wrong move and he’d nail me. I didn’t make any moves. Instead, I waited for him to tell me where to go.

He indicated I should follow him, and he returned to his bedroom where he grabbed a robe and threw it on, still clutching the rifle while he did so. I could see the TV was still on, throwing blue light across the rumpled bed clothes. Turned to CNN. Fortunately the only thing on this time was the explosion in Venice

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Beach. He saw me looking at the screen and grimaced.

“As usual, the whole city’s going crazy. At least it took the focus off you, I guess.”

“Well, not exactly.” Now that I was actually standing in front of him, I wasn’t sure how to say what I had come to say. I indicated the images of sheet-covered corpses and the still-smoldering *taqueria*. Then I gulped when a uniformed fireman came toward the camera carrying a small bundle in his arms. I could make out the fluttering dress I had seen earlier on what I had so optimistically thought was a doll. I shut my eyes, but knew the image would never leave me as long as I lived. “I’m part of that story, too, I’m afraid. Though I wish I weren’t.”

Tyler turned glazed eyes toward the screen just as the voracious camera zoomed in on the weary face of the firefighter and his light load, then he looked back to me. He leaned the rifle against the closet door. “I think you better tell me everything.”

Easier said than done, since I still didn’t know everything. But I tried to tell him what I did know. I figured it was crazy enough for one night. The rest of it, with luck, would come out in time.

He seemed to agree. I was barely into my recital of Bunny and me in the motel room when he abruptly turned away from me. “I don’t know about you, but I need a drink.”

“Please.”

“Beer?”

I thought of asking for something stronger, but had too many clear memories of the beach bar and tequila. “Yes, beer, please.”

He came back with two Grolschs. He didn’t bother with glasses this time. When he sat on the bed, I tentatively followed suit, and he waved me to continue.

So I told him about meeting Bunny, or Daron Najarian, at the

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Christopher Street West Gay Pride parade and taking him to Sunnyside. How we had gotten into it heavy-duty—I left out the cuffs and E—but was straight with all the rest, including being cold-cocked and left to discover the butchered Bunny and the approaching police.

“So why didn’t you stay to explain to them what happened.”

“You’ve never had a run-in with the local law, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m a law-abiding citizen—”

“Who makes porn. I know, it’s legal. Well I’m not—a law-abiding citizen, that is. They’d take one look at me and him, and they wouldn’t just jump to conclusions, they’d throw themselves and me over the cliff. I had no way to corroborate my statement. No one else saw the men in masks, and they sure as hell didn’t leave behind any DNA. And whatever trace they may have left...well, fuck, it was a hot-sheets motel room. There’s probably DNA and trace fibers from half of Los Angeles in there. But I doubt they left DNA.”

“And you did?”

“I was fucking the guy. Of course I did.”

He winced at my bluntness, but I didn’t figure this was a time for delicate sugarcoating. We were way past that.

After the motel, I did a quick run-through of my subsequent flight, stopping at my ex-wife’s, which raised the expected eyebrow.

“You were married?”

“Yeah, is that a surprise? Lots of people get married in this country who shouldn’t. We were young, stupid, horny—kind of redundant, don’t you think? Young, horny? Besides, I didn’t want to be gay. This was long before the days of gay prom queens. You just didn’t ‘come out’ in high school back then. Not if you wanted

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

to stay in one piece. Jolene got pregnant, and for the first and only time in my life, I tried to be honorable.” I took a slug of beer. “Look where that went.”

“Good intentions,” he muttered. “Go on.”

I explained the trip to Griffith Park where I had met him. His face darkened as my story went on. I knew he was getting pissed that I had picked him up with the sole purpose of hiding from the police.

I tried to cover my butt. “Hey, if your dog hadn’t pissed on me, we never would have met. I couldn’t have planned that, now could I?”

Barely mollified, he grunted and signaled I should continue. I did, after another swallow of beer.

“I knew the car could be tied straight back to me and the motel, so I had to dump it where someone was bound to find it and take it. I’d have taken it into South Central, but face it, a white guy shows up there and neither him nor his car is ever going to be seen again. I figured Griffith Park was a safer alternative.”

“You ever go back to see if it was still there?”

“Nah, I trust the citizens of L.A to be predictable. You know the rest.” I met his gaze and hoped he’d remember the good part of it, instead of the fear. He must have. His eyes grew dark as we stared at each other over our beers. “I came here, and we had some incredible sex.” I licked my lips, deliberately provocative. Scared or not, pissed as he was, Tyler was also a man. I did my best to ignore the tent growing under the folds of his robe. He was going to have to make the first move. “Then, all hell broke loose, to use a terrible cliché.”

“And I called the cops on you.”

“At least you listened enough to call Mark, otherwise we

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

wouldn't be having this conversation." This time, I tentatively reached out and touched his knee cap, sliding my fingers over the ball of his joint. His muscles flinched, and there was a definitely swelling between his legs.

"It was good, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was." I wasn't lying, either. My body responded to his closeness and remembered pleasures. Forget waiting for him. "We can..." I slid my hand down toward his lap, brushing the top of his dick through the robe. "Finish this conversation later."

His eyes closed and his mouth opened, and I thought he was going to pull me into his embrace, then without warning his hand shot out and grabbed my wrist, stopping my caress.

"Let's finish it now. I want to know what the fuck is going on, John."

"Call me Wager, everyone else does."

"Then talk to me, Wager."

I sighed and sat back, piling pillows behind me and leaning my head against the carved headboard.

"Fine. I left here with Mark, and that's when he told me he knew I didn't do it, but that the rest of his cop buddies weren't going to be so understanding and that I was still wanted on the beef. But he let me go, and I...enlisted a couple of friends who helped me get out to Venice Beach." I didn't want to implicate Hy or Taz just yet, and I didn't want to explain my journey through Grand Theft Auto and other sundry petty crimes. "I spent the day out there thinking things over, and I decided to turn myself in. I called Mark and told him to come out and get me."

Tyler looked skeptical, and I honestly couldn't blame him. Who invests that much time fleeing the police, only to turn around and hand themselves over to them? From an admitted liar, that was

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

hard to swallow.

"I've never been much for self-reflection. I'll be honest, most of it was spent on instant gratification. I'm proud of Mark, don't get me wrong, but never enough to actually make any changes to the way I lived. All I wanted was to have a good time. Any way I could."

"Do you have a real job? Or do you just hustle?"

"No, I don't 'just hustle.' I tended bar at Loro Azu, on Hawthorn Avenue. Been doing that for nearly two years now."

"So hustling is just a part-time gig?"

I bristled. "I told you I don't hustle. I've been known to relieve people of their property now and then, but I don't sell ass to anyone."

"So, a thief but not a whore. Good to know you have principles."

"Hey, I'm the first to admit I'm not perfect, but I'm far from the worst thing you'd meet on a dark street."

He snorted, but there was no real contempt in it. He even seemed mildly amused. Which beat the rifle any day. "So, if your son was going to pick you up and take you in, what are you doing here? And what does any of this have to do with that horrible thing that happened out in Venice? God, they said there were at least a dozen dead. Everyone's saying terrorists." He suddenly looked sick. "You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?"

"Except almost be a victim of it, no." I saw his unflinching fear. "No! I didn't. In fact, I think I may have been the target of it. Mark, too."

"You're saying someone blew up a taco wagon to kill you and your son? That's insane. Why would anyone do that?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. But Mark has some ideas."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I told him about the Armenians and their bootlegging and money laundering and other assorted scams.

“Organized crime? What the hell did you get yourself mixed up in?”

“Not me. I guess Daron was a C.I.—an informant for the cops. Someone found out what he was doing and didn’t want him talking. They tried to make me a scapegoat so no one would go after them.”

“And you brought that shit down on me? What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t, okay. Listen, I’ll go if you want. This was probably a mistake...”

“Fucking A it was.”

I moved to slide off the bed.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Wait.”

“For what? For you to get your gun again? I’ll leave, don’t worry—”

“Shut up. Feel sorry for yourself on someone else’s dime. Is there any chance you were followed here?”

“I don’t see how. I took the city bus into Hollywood, stopped at Loro, then came here. I never told anyone where I was going. As far as they know, I’m out looking for Hyacinth or Taz. I never mentioned you.”

“I’m not going to ask how you got here, I’ll just assume it wasn’t legal—”

“Shit.” I bolted upright. He was right, it wasn’t legal, and that small illegality was currently sitting in his drive. “I need to get rid of it.”

“Get rid of what?” He was alarmed. “What is it now, Wager?”

“The car. I, ah, borrowed a car to get here. It’s out front.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“There’s a stolen car in front on my house? The cops patrol this area all the time. If they spot it, and it’s been reported stolen...”

“That’s why I need to move it.”

“What? Take it away then what, come back here?”

“I’m not finished yet, so yes, I’d like to come back.” I tested the waters to see if he’d be willing to help me. “You could follow me and bring me back. If the cops pull me over before I dump it, you can just drive on. No harm, no foul.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” It was clear he wasn’t happy about being dragged into this mess, but he seemed willing to stick it out a while longer. Maybe the attraction hadn’t all been one sided. “I should have my head examined, but for some strange reason, I believe you. Come on, let’s go do this before I change my mind.”

With someone watching my tail, I was willing to venture a little farther east, and we crossed the river, ironically driving past the LAPD station on San Fernando. I was sure Tyler was shitting bricks all the time. I dropped off the car at the edge of Glassell Park, on a dark street by a graffiti-covered building that had seen better times, probably back in the eighties. The eighteen-eighties.

Once I was in the BMW, Tyler booted it out of there and sweated all the way back to his place. He didn’t take a single deep breath until he shut and locked the door behind us. His hyperventilating left him even paler than usual, and I led him back into the bedroom and made him lie down while I found a cloth I could wet and press over his suddenly flushed face. Finally, he stopped shaking and met my worried gaze.

“You really aren’t cut out for a life of crime, are you?” I ventured.

“N-no. Is that what it’s always like?”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“No.” I set the cool, wet cloth on the bedside table and stroked his collarbone gently, making circling motions over his still-tense skin. His flesh jumped and quivered under my soft touch. “Sometimes it’s moments of sheer terror mixed with the adrenaline high.”

“Is that what this is? Adrenaline? It’s spooky. Like being in the combat zone, only that was what I was trained for, and I believed in what I was doing. This is...wrong.”

“But exciting, no?” I continued stroking him, mostly to help distract and calm him. Funny, it was having the opposite effect on me. “That’s why it’s so addicting.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He burrowed into the rumpled covers and pushed his chest into my hand. “I don’t feel scared anymore.”

“No? What do you feel?”

“Horny,” he whispered.

That made two of us. I lowered my head and hovered less than an inch from his face. I stared into his eyes, making sure this was what he really wanted. Satisfied, I pressed my open mouth over his. I could taste the beer and the staleness of overnight breath. Not a turn off at all. I was too damn wound up and on edge to care. I pushed him back into the bed and attacked his mouth with a ferocity that startled even me. Maybe it was that classic near-death libido thing that was supposed to trigger our animal side to prove we were still alive by doing something so primal. What the fuck did I care? All I knew was that I wanted to fuck this guy until neither of us could walk a straight line. What better way to stop thinking, even momentarily, that there were people out there who wanted yours truly turned into worm food?

I rolled over, carrying him with me. Side by side, I tore at his clothes, wanting bare skin, wanting to taste him and feel his

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

excitement. He helped, ripping off his own shirt, buttons flying in his eagerness. I barely waited for his chest to be bared when I broke away from his mouth and planted mine on his throat where his pulse hammered. I left a wet trail down his neck, over the bumps and knobs of his shoulder and collar bone, then latched onto his right nipple. He jumped when I clamped my teeth on the hard nub.

“Jesus,” he yelped, but instead of pulling away he arched against my greedy mouth. I smoothed my tongue over him, lapping at the salty skin and moving to the other nipple. I nuzzled it and sucked until it was a rigid button he ground into my mouth. He was moaning now, pumping his hips against my taut thighs in desperate need and mewling deep in his throat.

When he struggled to pull off my T-shirt, I paused long enough to yank it off, then returned to him, our bare torsos sliding over each other, hearts hammering together as our rib cages and bellies collided. There was unmistakable recklessness in our movements now. I don’t think either of us could have stopped this tidal wave of lust if we had wanted to. I sure as hell didn’t want to.

I rolled again, this time rising above him, my hips between the saddle of his thighs, our swollen pricks pressed together, seeking release. I pulled up onto my knees and reached with one hand to free myself, urging him to do the same. After some maneuvers, complicated by the fact neither of us wanted to break contact long enough to make it easy, we stripped and lay naked, dick to dick, savoring the moment for all of two seconds. Then I started a tortured journey down his sweat-slicked flesh, sampling every dimple and curve of his body, pausing to re-explore his nipples, dipping my stiff tongue into his sweaty armpits and plunging into his navel. He moaned and writhed under my touch, opening and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

closing his legs in urgent need, which I ignored as long as I could. But soon, even my patience wore out.

I rose on my elbows and peered down at his dark, jutting cock. Already oozing copious amounts of pre-cum, it rose from a patch of light reddish hair. The angry head bobbed in time to his heavy breathing. I poked out my tongue and licked the tip, tasting the salty earthiness of the fluid leaking from his piss slit. He cried out and thrashed hard. I had to hold him down so tight I left white dimples in his skin.

“Easy, guy, we’re not there yet.”

“Oh fuck, please...”

I flicked my tongue over his helmet again. Same mewling cry, same begging. I moved down to the base of his erection, probing the soft skin behind his balls. I was enveloped in the earthy richness of the wrinkled skin of his sacks as he responded to my touch. His balls tightened. I backed off long enough to let the urge to ejaculate pass, then I traced the outline of veins up his shaft, circling the bulbous head once, then wrapping my lips around him. Fingers wound through my hair, holding me in place while he thrust his cock down my throat in ever more frenzied thrusts.

Again I backed off. His mewling turned to labored whining, and he rocked under me. I crawled up his body, taking as much time as I had going down. Finally, I hovered over his mouth, holding him in place with my body weight. He wrapped one leg around my hip, his heel pressing into my ass, making it obvious what he wanted.

“Skins,” I said. “Lube.”

He gestured toward the bedside table, which was beyond his reach. I moved over to it and rummaged in the drawer, coming up with several brightly colored condom wrappers and a tube of well-

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

used flavored lube. I looked at the label.

"Hmmm, strawberry. My second favorite." I returned to him, nuzzling his throat and nipping the skin above his Adam's apple. "Want to know what my first is?"

"What?" he gasped.

"Dick." I dove back down and slathered his cock with lube, licking and sucking him with renewed fervor. He was beyond reason now. I rolled a condom over myself and probed his hole with lube-coated fingers. "You ready for me?"

"God, yes. Fuck me, now. Hard!"

I complied, burying myself in his well-lubed ass with one thrust. We both held still then, savoring the moment. But not for long.

Soon I was rocking against him, sliding in and out with smooth, even strokes. He shifted the angle of his hips, and I must have been hitting his pleasure spot because he began to thrust wildly, humping with total abandon, pulling at my ass, trying to drive me deeper. I obeyed his unspoken command and hammered into him, no longer holding back anything. We were silent now, the only sound in the room our heavy, broken breathing and the moist slap of hard-pounding flesh.

He reached between us and grasped his cock, pumping it fiercely, cum pulsing over his stomach and fist. He didn't stop until the last spasm had passed through him. His inner muscles tightened around me, and I blasted into the condom, collapsing on top of him, where we lay welded together by sweat and cum. I wasn't sure for a minute if I could even move, then I rolled off him and pulled him into my arms. We lay side by side on the damp, stained sheets until our breathing grew more normal and our heartbeats slowed.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I stroked the wet hair off his face. Then traced the outline of his swollen mouth.

He smiled against the palm of my hand. “Maybe there’s something to be said for taking a walk on the wild side.”

“Well, stick around me, you’re likely to get more than you can handle.”

“Oh, I doubt it.” He nuzzled my throat, then dropped his head back on the pillow, eyes closed. “We’re good, right?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

We dozed then, not waking until the sun was well past the meridian. Even then, we didn’t leave our warm nest, preferring to lie there, arms and legs entwined, until finally one of our stomachs rumbled.

“Oh, that’s embarrassing.”

“Nah,” I said. “Just another kind of hunger. Gotta feed one to have the energy to do that other.”

“So now we gotta get up and do breakfast?”

“Well we could go out, but I am a wanted man...”

The reminder was like a dash of ice water. Tyler pulled away from me and rolled over to sit up, his feet over the edge of the bed.

“Then I guess I’ll go make breakfast,” he said. “Let the dog out.”

“Yes, do that. Otherwise he might take another stab at watering my leg.”

I ended up joining him in the kitchen. I wasn’t much of a cook, but I could crack eggs with the best of them and slather butter on toasted rye. We cooked up a massive breakfast—nothing like a good sweaty fuck to make a man hungry—and ate it in the living room as we watched more fucking. Which led to the inevitable conclusion. I hadn’t been this horny or unstoppable since I was a

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

randy, confused teenager. Tyler shared my enthusiasm. He must not have been getting any lately.

Finally, we showered and returned to the living room with a pot of coffee to sharpen our senses.

"I need you to tell me everything you know about movie pirating," I said to start.

"Tall order."

"Then give me the basics. How are the movies pirated? Who wants them?"

"Who wants them? Everyone, it seems." He almost sounded bitter. "People hear all about how many millions of dollars those big movies make and how much the stars make, so they don't think there's anything wrong with taking a piece in the form of free movies. They don't care that a lot of flesh and blood goes into those things. The bottom line is only a handful of creative people actually make money at what they do. I think it's something like less than two percent make a living at it, no matter what their profession."

"So, how do they rip you off?"

"More ways than I can count. Free downloads from a thousand pirate sites all over the world. Oscar review copies mysteriously disappear, and copies show up in flea markets selling for five bucks a pop before they reach the video stores. They figure a lot of that money goes to fund terrorists."

Terrorists. The buzz word of the day. "How do they get the stuff to download?" What I knew about computers could be written on a grocery list in between the groceries.

"You'd be surprised the lengths they go to. Video recorders in the theaters, dubbing DVDs, getting an insider to hack the servers they store the masters on. Where there's money, there's a will, and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

where there's a will..."

"There's a way."

"Right."

"But if a lot of people are doing it, and the downloads are free, how do they make money?" I understood straightforward burglary easily enough. Slip in to someone's place and grab a few fenceable items, then out before the alarm can be raised. And boosting cars, really, what could be simpler than that? Even selling some E or a little ice was simple economics. But money laundering? Every time I heard the phrase, I had a vision of someone dumping buckets of cash into a giant drier and watching the bills whirl around.

"The big bucks are in the pre-releases. It's before something even hits the theater that it's most in demand. That's when they can ask for and get bigger money. It's a short window, but a profitable one."

"That's probably where the money laundering comes in. Clean it up by running it through a couple of semi-legit operations and dump it back out on the street. Big money there." I thought of something else. "What do you know about money laundering?"

"They toss a bunch of phony bills in a drier with pennies to make them look used? I don't know."

It was so much like my earlier thought, I burst out laughing...the first good laugh I'd had since this mess started. He grinned along with me. I sobered and asked, "Last but not least, what do you know about the Armenian mob?"

"Armenian mob? Nothing. Little Armenia is down the hill, over by Vermont, I think." He frowned. "Armenian mob... I may be able to find out."

"How?" Did he have some inside connection I didn't know

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

about or even suspected?

“I’ll Google it.”

I’d heard the phrase before, but never paid much attention to it. Turned out it was yet another part of the Internet I’d only heard about. Like Twitter and Facebook, I was totally lost when the subject came up. Tyler led me into a smaller room down the hall from his bedroom where a desk, a swivel chair, file cabinet and bookcases filled the space. On the desk, sat a black TV that turned out to be a computer monitor. He sat in the swivel chair and flipped on the monitor.

While he did whatever you do to computers, I wandered around the small room. There were precious few personal things—no family photos, no family mementos of any kind from what I could see. None of those handcrafted kindergarten drawings, no kitschy things from places like Disneyland, no family homilies on the walls. If Tyler had ever succumbed to having a wife, she had left no lasting impression in his life.

A small, framed box containing military medals sat in one corner on a shelf. I peered in at them, but had no idea what they were for. I noticed another picture of Tyler in uniform, a more formal one this time. He wore a crisp navy blue outfit and stood stiff, his chest covered in the same medals I saw in the case. So he was decorated, too. Had he been wounded? I hadn’t seen any scars, but then I hadn’t been looking for any.

Within a few minutes the computer screen flickered, and Tyler started typing. I pulled over a second, less comfortable chair and sat where I could watch what he was doing, not that I understood a thing he was up to. Columbo waddled in and flopped over on my bare feet. I started wiggling my toes to rub his ears. He sighed.

Finally, I saw the multi-colored words “Google” come up, and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

he typed in “Armenian Mafia.” Within seconds, the screen was full of blue underlined text. He did something and another screen came up, this one displaying what looked like a newspaper article. The heading said:

MULTIPLE ARRESTS DURING VIOLENT CONFRONTATION WITH NYPD

We looked over several more pages, all with pretty much the same message: the so-called Armenian mob was ruthless and cold blooded in their pursuit of power and money. They were heavy in the drug trade and money laundering, but also indulged in human trafficking, which sounded a lot nastier. They were known to use excessive force to take out anyone who stood to hurt them. So the idea they would kill a dozen innocent people in a bombing to get one or two, wasn’t outside the pale. I swallowed against a sudden rush of nausea. I had gotten people killed. Those children had died because of me. If I hadn’t picked up Bunny and taken him to that motel, none of this would have happened. Bunny would probably still have been murdered, but I wouldn’t have become an ancillary target for them. Or Mark.

Tyler looked back at me and must have seen something on my face. He spun around and forced me to look at him.

“What is it, Wager? What’s wrong?”

How could I tell him? He couldn’t possibly understand. He hadn’t seen the burned corpses littering the parking lot like so much refuse. I shook my head, my gaze darting away from his. But he wasn’t going to be ignored. He grabbed my chin in surprisingly strong fingers and forced me to meet his eyes.

“Are you feeling guilty?” He scanned my face grimly. “You

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

are, aren't you? Let me tell you that you are not responsible. What those cold-blooded bastards did is not your fault. They're responsible, not you. Got that?"

I tried to pull back my head, but he held on. Knowing I had to say something or he'd never let me go, I snapped, "Yes, I got it. But you didn't see them." I knew my voice sounded haunted. Never before had my actions come home to roost with such terrible results. "There were kids there, Tyler. A little girl. She didn't deserve that."

"None of them did. No one should go out for a fun day at the beach and die any way. But you didn't make that bomb. Or put it there to blow that place up. Whoever put it there, knew what it was and where it was. When the insurgents set off IEDs to blow up our convoys, I didn't blame myself or my commanding officers for putting us in those trucks. I blamed the insurgents. They knew there would be families at the taco truck. *They knew and they didn't care.*"

He was right. I had to get over this, or I wouldn't be able to help myself get out of the mess. Sure as hell, no one else was going to make the effort. Even if Mark thought I was innocent, it didn't change what we were to each other. I remained his loser father whom he'd rather have out of his life for good. I couldn't imagine the day that would come when he got married and maybe even had kids—my grandkids—but one thing I knew, I wouldn't be part of that life. If I were him, I wouldn't want me within a hundred miles of my children. No one needed a grandfather like me.

Tyler was still talking. "They're nasty, and you sure as hell didn't make them nasty. You didn't do anything to deserve this. Neither did your son."

"Fine," I shouted. "I know I wasn't responsible. But how do I

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

make it right?"

"Maybe you can't. Have you ever thought of that?"

I didn't want to think of that, though I knew with a high degree of certainty that he was correct. Chances were, I'd never be able make it right for anyone. Wasn't going to stop me from trying.

Funny how nobility doesn't make you feel better. In fact, I felt like a bloody fool. I didn't have much doubt Mark would agree with my assessment.

Speaking of Mark, I needed to talk to him. He might have found out some things about both the bombing and Bunny's death. Abruptly, I wrenched my chin out of Tyler's grip. "I need to make a phone call."

"You can use mine." He pointed to a portable on the filing cabinet. But I'd already pulled out the cell Hyacinth had given me. I punched in Mark's number.

He answered on the third ring, and I could hear voices in the background. Was he at the station?

"Marki—Mark, it's me."

His voice dropped to a near whisper. "Dad? Where are you?"

"Better I don't say right now. What's the news?"

"I can't talk right now."

"Can we meet then? It's important, Mark."

I glanced over at Tyler who was frowning, trying to figure out what was going on. I covered the cell. "He wants to meet."

Tyler's frown deepened, then he nodded. "Fine, have him come here if he wants. It's probably safer for all of us."

Knowing Mark wasn't going to be happy facing the man who knew who he was, I still told him Tyler's offer.

With great reluctance, he agreed. "An hour," he said. "I have to finish up some things before I can sign out."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I disconnected and turned to find Tyler watching me. “He’ll be here in an hour. Do me a favor, don’t bring up the movie. It’s a sore spot.”

“No kidding? Fine, I won’t mention it. I’m not into straight porn, anyway, so what do I care?”

“No, you just make money at it.”

“Something wrong with that?”

I grinned, feeling suddenly tired. “Not a thing. Look, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to take a shower.”

“Sure. I may be able to find some other clothes you can fit into, too.”

He did, and soon I was sitting in his living room in a clean pair of jeans that were a bit too loose and a bulky pink alpaca sweater that had been left by his sister. I had looked down at myself after getting dressed and sighed. “This is totally going to seal his opinion of me.”

Tyler shrugged. “You look cute. Besides, it was the only thing that came close to fitting you.”

“Cute.” I grimaced.

“Don’t forget sexy.” He moved to stand in front of me, cupping my swelling dick in his hand. “Nothing wrong with that.”

I would have taken it further, but the awareness that Mark was going to show up at any moment put a damper on my libido. I didn’t need any repeats of last night when he caught me in bed, buck-naked, with another man in the same state. It’s one thing to know I fuck men, it’s another thing to see it in the flesh, so to speak.

By the time the knock sounded at the door, we were sitting decorously in the living room in separate chairs. I had a cup of steaming coffee in front of me, and when Tyler came in with Mark,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

he had a coffee, as well. Mark did a double take when he saw me. I'd almost forgotten the pink nightmare I was wearing. My face felt hot.

Mark had changed out of his uniform. So this wasn't a work call. He took a seat on the sofa Tyler pointed to and immediately leaned forward, hands knotted on his jean-clad lap. He didn't waste any time on small talk.

"The initial report seems to suggest the device was a pipe bomb full of nails and broken glass, designed to do maximum damage. There are specific signatures that point to the Armenians, like I suspected. They don't know who the target was. They'll be going through the histories of all the victims, assuming it was one of them. I haven't told them anything else at this point."

That clearly bothered him. Here I was sitting on something that might help crack the case. But for Mark to divulge what he knew, he'd have to admit he was aware of my whereabouts prior to this, which could only get him into deeper shit. I'd already gathered his relationship with me was not sitting well with the suits. He was a political nightmare right now, a cop with a killer father. Talk about bad PR.

"Have they IDed everyone?" I thought of the small bodies I had seen, and the last news report Tyler and I had watched on CNN. Were their parents among the dead or the mourners laying flowers at the scene, as shown by the TV cameras?

"No, not yet. Some are...not yet. They're working through DNA and dentals."

"How many?" The last count on CNN had been twelve dead, but there were several in critical condition in the hospital.

"Fourteen," he said. He shook his blond head. "Two more hanging in there."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Then I asked the question I really didn't want an answer to: "How many children?"

The look he gave me was nearly as haunted as I felt. "Three," he whispered. "A six-year-old girl and two brothers, two and four. Their parents"—his voice broke—"their parents weren't hurt."

We both knew that was bull. Their parents were hurt far beyond what mere dying would have accomplished.

"They're looking for witnesses to come forward."

"I wish I could help, but I didn't see anything."

"Did you ever find the person you were looking for? The one you thought was responsible for setting you up?"

"No. Not yet."

"You know if you give me her name, we might have better luck finding her than you would."

Maybe, but I had a few questions to ask Hyacinth before I turned her ass over to the cops. Some hard questions I was going to get answers to, no matter what. I wasn't constrained by a suspect's rights, so she was going to talk to me if I had to borrow one of Tyler's firearms and make her. Probably not the best idea I've ever had. But all I had to do was think of the fireman carrying that little bundle in his arms to know that I might not be able to refrain from using a gun.

I said to Mark, "You don't know the streets like I do. Not those streets, at least."

He had to concede that, though I could tell he didn't want to. But then, Mark never wanted to admit he didn't know something.

"You keep me in the loop the whole time," he said. "And I mean the whole time. I want to know every move you make, and if you find her, I better know it ASAP."

I solemnly promised I would keep him informed. And I would,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

just not quite as promptly as he wanted me to.

He stood up. "I don't feel good letting you go like this. I should, by rights, take you in so you can tell the case detectives what your suspicions are."

"And you know why I can't do that. I haven't been cleared of Daron's death. If I went in and got arrested, the only thing I'd do would be to get a lawyer and invoke. Neither you nor your detectives would get a damn thing out of me."

I could see from his face that he was well aware of what I meant. Finally, he sighed and glanced up at Tyler. His look said it all. *I hope you know what you're getting into.*

He stopped on the way out and turned to look back at me. "Pink suits you."

I sputtered as Tyler led him out of the room, and I could hear them murmuring in the front of the house before the door shut and Tyler came back.

"He wants you to talk me into 'cooperating,' doesn't he?"

He looked startled. "Well, that and find you some decent cloths. I didn't think you two knew each other all that well. I got the impression you'd been estranged for a long time."

"Pretty much his whole life. But he's too much like me, as much as he hates to admit it. We don't read minds, but we know how the other one thinks."

"He's sure you're deliberately hindering the investigation, and he's pretty sure you're doing it for all the wrong reasons."

"Maybe he's right. But define wrong. A friend I thought I knew sold me out to a bunch of vicious killers, and I want to know why. That's my investigation. Since finding that out will reveal who those killers are, our investigations converge in the end."

CHAPTER 12

Tyler thawed out steaks for supper, which he cooked to perfection on a grill in his sprawling backyard. The yard lay on the slopes of the Hollywood Hills. He told me if you climbed to the top of his property, you could see the Hollywood sign. Columbo followed me around, lying at my feet whenever I sat. The dog was clearly smitten. I couldn't say I returned the feeling. He liked to rub his massive head against my still-bare feet. Apparently, I now had a friend for life whether I wanted one or not.

Tyler was amused. "I think he wants you to stick around."

I grinned, not at all adverse to the idea—for the moment at least. If I had to hide out from the law, Tyler's Hollywood Hills home, full of expensive art and good beer, worked for me. Not to mention the presence of a decidedly delicious cock to snack on

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

between meals.

It was funny. If I had met Tyler in a club down on the flats, I would have ignored him. He definitely wasn't eye candy, and while he had a killer body under his plain clothes, along with a sweet personality, who looked at those things when scouting for cock? For me it was ass and face all the way.

Not that Tyler didn't have a sweet ass, but he didn't showcase it, so nobody but me knew about it. Come to think of it, that might not be a bad thing.

After supper, we sat in the living room. We didn't need words to decide not to watch any more news. After a while, I rubbed my chin, feeling the rasp of day-old beard. "I need to round up a razor before I start looking like Columbo's country cousin."

"I don't know...I like a beard on a man. Besides"—he suddenly sat up—"wouldn't it be a good idea to change your appearance? They're flashing your picture all over the place whenever they replay the murder story. You can't stay in here all the time if you're serious about finding this woman."

He made sense. Maybe changing my looks a bit wouldn't fool the cops, who were trained to look for differences like that, but the average Joe on the street might be fooled.

"You could wear one of my hats, too. And keep wearing my clothes—" At my alarmed look he conceded. "Okay, not the pink sweater, though you have to admit no one would expect to see you in it."

"Next thing you'll be dressing me up in drag."

"Nah, but I'd keep the pink if I were you." I was dismayed to find Tyler looking me over like I was a side of beef. "I think I have the perfect pants for you," he went on. "Your own mother wouldn't recognize you."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Not necessarily a bad thing. I'd love a world where my own mother didn't know me. Then it hit me. Is that how it was for Mark? Did he wish I didn't know him, that I would stay away permanently? Now there was a depressing thought.

I scrubbed my face, judging the growth. Give it another day and I'd be good to go out to the streets looking for Hyacinth the traitor. Oh, what I was going to do to that bitch when I got my hands on her. I'd rip out every one of her acrylic inlays and feed them to her one at a time.

Tyler broke down out of habit and flipped on the news at ten. Nothing new on the Venice Beach Bombings. Confirmed dead was fifteen. The last survivor had been moved out of critical care and was expected to make a full recovery. So far, twelve of the dead had been identified and their next of kin notified. That was a job the police did that I didn't envy them. I tried to imagine Mark making a notification visit, telling someone that a loved family member wasn't coming home ever again. Could Mark manifest the right amount of empathy an onerous task like that would call for? Personally, I couldn't see it. He'd never been very empathetic to anyone's feelings. He was like his mother that way.

The TV program moved on to sports. The Angels were on a losing streak, the Dodgers hung on by the skin of their cleats. A filly took a fall at Hollywood Racetrack and caused a spectacular pile up. The announcer kept going on about how amazing it was no one was hurt, though one of the horses would have to be put down with a broken leg. I guess "no one was hurt" didn't include the livestock. Finally, a commercial came on. I took the remote from Tyler's hands and with a finger-flick turned off the TV. Reaching over him, I put the controller on the bedside table and pulled out the lube and skins before I came back partway. I half rested on

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Tyler's chest, playing with the red fuzz on his nearly hairless chest. Along the way, I tweaked a nipple into hardness.

"Tired?"

He gave me a lazy smile. "Not terribly. You?"

"Not at all."

"Good."

Before I could do more than plant a kiss on his shoulder, he rolled me over and pressed me down on the sheets. "Not the least bit tired."

He spread his hands across my chest. Funny, I had never noticed how big his hands were. They spanned the width of my chest. His fingers traced a circle around my right nipple, then my left. He replaced his fingers with his mouth, and a moan escaped me as a jolt of pure desire slammed through my gut straight to the base of my dick.

When his lips closed around my straining erection, I arched into him, fingers digging in his scalp with a need to drive myself deeper into his wet heat. His mouth was magic, his touch produced an exquisite pleasure that bordered on pain. He rolled a condom over my fat cock and rose up, straddling my hips. With one finger, he lubed up his own ass and positioned himself over me. I held his hips in a vise grip as he lowered himself onto me, pressing my bulbous head past his tight sphincter, into the channel. I began stroking his prostrate, knowing I'd hit it when his inner muscles clenched around me, caressing me along my entire length.

Every nerve ending sprang to life at his touch. I reached up blindly and found his nipples, squeezing and twisting them until Tyler groaned and thrust against me, driving my cock deeper into him.

When he bent over, I grabbed his head and brought him down,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

ramming my mouth over his. Our tongues fought, and our moans turned to desperate whimpers. Tingling started at the base of my cock and spread until it encompassed me. I no longer had any control. My muscles writhed and sensations flared and ebbed, driving me toward release. When it finally came, I went into overload. I think I blacked out. When I came to, I was enclosed in Tyler's arms, and he was gasping for breath, his face pressed against my throat. He raised his head and blinked down at me. Searching my face...looking for what?

Then he lay his head back down and within seconds, he was asleep. I wasn't far behind.

Morning came way too early. I groaned when the blankets were jerked off me. "Rise and shine, Cinderella. It's time to clean the chimney."

"Huh?" I blinked up and found Tyler leaning over me. His eyes were red, and his hair looked like it had been through a blender. "Chimney? I don't do chimneys."

"I picked out some clothes for you. Get up and take a look. Don't forget—no shaving. It's Miami Vice time for you, my friend."

"I always liked the black guy in that," I muttered, trying to burrow back under the covers. "Forget that slut Crockett."

"I wish I could," Tyler sighed. "I wish I could."

He kept nagging me until I left the bed and checked out my new wardrobe. It was worse than I had feared. He had found a pair of cotton pants that were even bigger and more hideous than the ones he had loaned me the day before. He let me keep my own boxers. But he left the pink alpaca sweater and insisted I wear it.

"No one is even going to look at you, let alone recognize you in this getup."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I surveyed myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror in his closet. “I don’t recognize me.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

I supposed it was. I’d never been the most fashion-conscious person, but I usually wanted to show off what I had. And this...costume...did nothing for me. I looked like a circus clown fallen on hard times. He wouldn’t even let me brush my hair. Instead, he handed me a hat, some ridiculous felt thing that looked like it had come straight out of a gangster movie. When I put it on and pulled it down over my eyes, he rearranged it, pushing it high on my forehead and told me to leave it there. Now I truly looked like a dork. I said as much.

“But an unrecognizable dork.”

He had me there.

“I have to go into work for a bit. We’re launching a new series, and I want to be there for it. Hey, you know if your son wants some money, I can probably find him some choice roles. Mind you, there’s not much money in straight porn for the men. Someone should tell him he could make a fortune if he did gay for pay.”

“You can be the one who suggests it to him. Just let me be in the other room when you do. And make sure you disarm him first.”

Tyler shrugged. “Don’t tell me he didn’t do it the first time for money. Money’s better on the other side.”

He dropped me off at Hollywood and Vine, told me he’d call my cell later on, come by and pick me up. He made me promise that I wouldn’t boost any more cars to get around. I promised, albeit reluctantly. Not having wheels was a pain, but I’d make do for now.

Once this shit was over, I fully intended to have a car again.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I cruised the Strip. From Hollywood to Sunset, I went on the stroll. Stopping in every bar and tweaker hangout I suspected Hy and her sidekick had visited. And I knew them all. I saw customers who had bought product from me on numerous occasions, but not one of them recognized me. I began to feel like the invisible man.

The bars got tedious after a while. I rarely even bothered to get a drink in any of them after the fifth or sixth. As the day moved into afternoon, I got closer to Loro Azu. Finally, I stood outside the azure doors and studied the street around me, looking for Hy's pink Kia. So far I hadn't spotted it anywhere. Had she gone into hiding? If no one had seen Taz for a day and a half, did that mean Hy had joined him in flight? Did that mean Taz was involved in this, too? I had never known one of the daring duo to do anything without the other. They were like Siamese twins, joined at the hip, though Hy often said it was somewhere else they were connected. But no one ever thought of Hy *or* Taz, it was always Hyacinth *and* Taz. An Amazon in drag and her little Puerto Rican elf or sprite, whatever it was that Amazons associated with.

So where had they got to?

My cell vibrated. I pulled it out, expecting it to be Tyler. It was a blocked number. I turned so my back was to the wall near the *carnicería* beside the bar and answered it.

"Hey sugar, I hear you're looking for me."

It was Hyacinth.

"Yeah, sugar. I am," I said with studied casualness. "Where you at?"

"Around. We need to talk, but I gotta make sure things are in the right place first. Can you wait for me, sugar?"

"Wait? No, I can't wait. We need to talk now—"

But she had disconnected. I cursed and spun around to find

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

myself face to face with Marco, one of Loro's regulars. I jerked my hat down over my eyes and pushed past him, heading to the alley between Loro and the *carnicería*. At first I was afraid Marco was going to follow me, either because he recognized me or to see if he could spin a few *dineros* off me, voluntarily or not. But he didn't. I had the alley to myself. Well, me and the rats and roaches that thrived in the dark places.

The Dumpster where I had buried the knife Taz had used to kill or seriously put a hurt on the man or men who beat Hyacinth that day, reeked of day-old meat and beans spoiling in the heat. A drone rose and fell as flies found new places to feast and lay their eggs. The garbage would be riddled with maggots by now. Like the squirming maggots that would have eaten the man Taz killed. I knew there was the possibility he didn't kill anyone, but when Taz said he took care of the *Pinche culero*, I tend to think he meant it in a permanent way. Not that I had ever blamed him. Anyone who fag-bashed, deserved whatever bashing they got in return.

And what would cause Hyacinth to do a similar deed for Taz? Because I didn't doubt for an instant that her loyalty and devotion to him was no less than his to her.

Had something happened to Taz? Is that why he was missing, and Hy was acting like a deranged lunatic? I poked around the alley, not sure what I was looking for, just sure I'd know it when I saw it.

On the Boulevard on the other side of the *carnicería*, traffic droned. Pigeons cooed on the rafters overhead, layering the ground under them with shit and dirty feathers. I watched one bob and strut before an indifferent female, trying so hard to please her. We all danced the same drill. Trying to find "the one" in this crazy world, someone we could cling to when the world went adrift. At

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

least, that's what most people did, isn't it? I'd never felt that tug. Even when I married Jolene, it hadn't been there. We'd done what was convenient at the moment, and from that had produced a half-decent human whom I was working really hard to fuck up.

Did I envy what Taz and Hyacinth had? Could I be like that for anyone? I couldn't see it. Did that mean I was half a man and Hy, who wore more makeup than Tammi Faye Baker and dressed like a doyen off the 40's silver screen, was more of a man than I had ever been?

My cell vibrated again. I snapped it up, expecting it to be Hyacinth with more games. It was Tyler. I couldn't believe it. I was glad to hear his voice.

"You done for the day?" he asked.

I looked around the dismal, filthy alley and watched a rat drag a piece of something it must have thought was edible along the cracked wall. "Yeah, I'm done. You going home?"

"Yeah. You want me to pick you up?"

I couldn't believe the hopeful sound in Tyler's voice. The guy *wanted* me to go home with him? I thought of telling him no, I didn't want to be picked up. I didn't need him or anybody. Then I thought of what I would be doing if I stayed out here. Eventually, I'd hit one of the bars, and that one I wouldn't leave. Maybe I'd find Hyacinth, and maybe I'd kill her for what she tried to do to me. Or maybe I'd just get lost in a bottle of booze someplace. My hand closed over the tiny phone; I'm surprised I didn't crush it.

"Yeah, I'd like you to come and get me."

Columbo greeted me when I stepped through the door like I was Anthony returning to his Cleopatra. He galumphed after me and wouldn't settle down until I sat in the living room, and he could wallow in my feet. I took off my shoes and socks, and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

massaged his ears. He snored contentedly, drooling over my bare toes.

Tyler was grinning ear to ear. "He's in love."

"It's the Wager touch. No one can resist it."

"Certainly not me." He brought me a beer and settled on the couch beside me. "You have any luck today?"

"Define luck. Well, for starters you were right. Not one person recognized me, and I saw a few old..." I was going to say customers, but switched it to friends.

"Did you find out anything about this woman?"

"Hyacinth?" I shook my head. "But she did call me."

He straightened and stared at me. "She called—what did she say? Where is she? What—"

"She didn't tell me anything. She said she needed to talk to me, but she wouldn't say where or when. Something about the right place and time. I hate to admit it, but it looks like the ball's in her court."

"Where could she have gone?"

"I wish I knew."

"You going to keep looking?"

What else did he think I could do? Sit around his house eating cheese and crackers, and watching porn until my brains dribbled out of my head? I don't think so. "I'll keep going out until I find her."

"Maybe you never will."

"I'll take that chance."

"If you like, you can stay here while you do," he said shyly.

An irrational desire to jump up and flee swept through me. I clamped down on the impulse and forced myself to focus on the dog at my feet. That way, I didn't have to look at the man beside

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

me. What was happening here? But I needed a place to stay, didn't I? So I could do it here or waste my time finding another place. And I could guarantee it wouldn't be nearly as nice as this. No sex, either.

The sex decided me. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

"Sure, I could do that."

Mark called that night. We both had nothing to report. His disappointment was palpable. But he didn't lose the opportunity to ask me for Hyacinth's name. I refused. Again. The argument that followed was getting stale.

Finally, I hung up on him with an abrupt, "I'll call you tomorrow."

I was even scruffier the next day. Same baggy pants, same atrocious pink top. I was going to be taken for a homeless person soon. That might be good, or it might not be. If I got roused by the Hollywood cops, I could be in some serious shit. I decided to take my chances one more day.

After Tyler dropped me off, I went straight to Loro this time. I slid through the front doors, aware that most of the regular crowd who knew me wouldn't be there this early. It was just me and Sid, and I figured I'd been around Sid enough to know he wouldn't look at a guy like me. As long as I didn't scare the horses, or the other customers, and I spent my green on his beer, he couldn't care less.

I slid into a table beside the john and pulled the hat low over my face. Sooner or later, everyone who came in would pass by me, and maybe I could coax a few into talking with the offer of a drink. Somebody, somewhere, had to have seen Hyacinth or Taz. I mean what could be more obvious than a six-foot-five drag queen in four-inch heels and her little Puerto Rican sidekick? Not fucking

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

much.

Every time the door swung open letting in shafts of brain-stabbing sunlight and the stench of uncollected garbage from the back alley, my heart would pump a few beats faster until I knew it wasn't Hy or Taz. Around noon, my regulars started drifting in. By this time, I was a fixture in the back corner, and everyone ignored me. I got two drafts every time I ordered another beer, and when someone wound his way back to the washroom, I would snag him when he came out and ask him if he knew Hyacinth. If he said sure, I'd offer him a drink and ask if he'd seen her lately. I kept my voice gruff and low so it wouldn't sound familiar to anyone. I was lucky in that Hollywood was the kind of place where no one really paid much attention to the people around them unless they were famous. I told anyone who asked that I owed her money, and she told me she was gonna wup my ass if I didn't pay it. Not a man among them didn't doubt my story for a second. We'd all seen Hy do just that on more than one occasion. They all took my beer. No one was helpful though. It was beginning to look as though Hy and Taz had gone ghost on Hollywood and headed for greener pastures.

Can't say as I blame Hy, if indeed she was in any way involved in the Venice Beach bombing. I'd be leaving town, too, and I'd be doing it in the dead of night so no one could see my passing.

But no matter what I knew or thought I knew, I still couldn't wrap my head around Hyacinth doing it. There'd never been a sweeter, gentler person. Sure she could kick your ass to San Diego if you pissed her off or hurt a friend, but to do something that would harm so many people she didn't know? And for what? What possible reason could she have to want to harm me?

There was something I didn't understand here, and until I did

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

understand it, I was never going to know what had gone down in Venice Beach. Without finding and talking to Hy, I was wandering around in the dark without hands.

Sid was replaced by someone I didn't recognize. My replacement, I guess. I watched the cocky young wannabe cruise the bar I used to own and wanted to go up and smash his pretty face. At least I could relax around this one. I saw his gaze slide my way once and look away with obvious contempt and dismissal. I was just a surly, miserable drunk, and in his world that equaled nothing.

I was idling away my time, thinking of interesting ways I could ruin this little twerp's day, when my cell vibrated. I pulled it out, hoping it was Tyler ready to come and rescue me from my own folly.

"I need you to come to me." The all-too-familiar southern Louisiana patois didn't contain the normal Hyacinth brashness. She sound subdued. "You have to come, Wager."

"Why?" I said coolly, not ready to fall for whatever game she had decided to play, like maybe setting me up for another explosive play date. "Maybe I don't feel like coming there." Wherever the hell "there" was. But maybe she'd let that slip if I toyed with her enough.

"It's important, Johnny. You need to come, now. It's life and death."

"Already been there, sugar." I was shaken, though. Hyacinth never called me Johnny. J-man, yes. Wager sometimes. But Johnny? Or John? Never. What was up with that?

"No, this is real this time."

"Where are you?" I pressed.

"I'm in Cat City." Her already-soft voice dropped even lower,

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

something I hadn't known Hy could even do. "You have to come, John. They're going to kill him."

"Kill who? Did you get some bad crack? Is that what this is? A fucking bad trip? And what are you doing in Cathedral City, of all places? That's like three hours from here."

"I'm staying with a friend."

Her evasions annoyed me.

"Remy, I want answers," I snapped, using her hated birth name. In a fit of rare, drug-induced nostalgia, Hyacinth had told me she was born with the name Remy Delafloate, then later begged me to forget it. Up until now, I had honored that request.

Her voice hardened. "If you want answers, then come and get them. I'm staying at the Palm Inn on Vista Chino." She disconnected, leaving me seething.

Palm Inn? What had happened to her friend? I threw a few curses into the dank bar air, drawing sullen glances from those whose stupor had taken a welcome hold, then I started to storm from the bar. Just before I stomped through the front doorway, a voice I recognized called my name.

I didn't turn, but I knew the caller, and I knew I'd been made. So now everyone in Hollywood and parts west were going to know Johnny Wager was skulking around in some kind of deranged, lost-souls way looking for Hyacinth, who clearly didn't want to be found.

Well, fuck them all.

I was going to Cathedral City.

Of course, getting there might present a problem. No wheels, no credit, no real money. How's a boy to do it?

I boosted the little gray Honda Accord out of the parking lot on Cherokee and was on the road by six. By seven, I remembered

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Tyler and wondered when, or if, he'd be calling. No time for that right now. I pulled out my cell, briefly thought of calling first Tyler, then Mark, then just as quickly decided no, I wasn't going to.

I turned off the phone. Now it was just me and the road. And Hyacinth coming up.

Once I left civilization behind, the land grew more barren. Near Desert Hot Springs, the terrain was a sterile flatland that rose in folds to the distant San Bernardino Mountains to the north and the San Jacinto peaks south. As the sky deepened through shades of pink and magenta to cobalt blue, thousands of wind turbines appeared, marching off into the hazy distance, rotating in a stately and slightly hypnotic motion, capturing the endless winds and powering a nation. I rarely got out this way, but whenever I did, I couldn't help but be awed by the sheer scope of the wind farms.

The monstrous turbines shrank and became spindly towers glowing red and gold in the fading light, then vanished altogether until only the desert remained, dark and restless with the winds flowing off the distant mountains. Then, the lights of Desert Palms passed by me, and finally Cathedral City appeared.

CHAPTER 13

Cathedral City has a reputation for playing fast and loose with things, like laws. During Prohibition, it had been a destination of choice as a drinking man's paradise and always carried the tarnish of its outlaw reputation uneasily.

For the most part, it was a typical SoCal community promising sun, fun and all the golfing you could stomach. It boasted some gorgeous scenery, none of which I paid the slightest attention to when I rolled into town around eight-thirty.

The sun was making its final curtain call over the rugged vistas of Mount San Jacinto. The mountain range threw deepening shadows, and the street lights began flickering on as I searched for the Palm Inn. I almost missed it, tucked behind a cheesy strip mall and a two-story office building.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I spotted Hy's Kia immediately. Really girlfriend, if you want to hide, you don't drive around a flamingo-pink car sporting a rainbow decal on the back bumper. I pulled in beside the vehicle and studied the row of closed motel doors in front of me. I sat there for several seconds, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, then I shut down the engine, pocketed the dummy key and climbed out. A quick feel of the Kia's hood told me it had been there awhile. So, where was Hyacinth?

A slat blind moved, and I saw a flash of scarlet and diamond before the dark hand disappeared and the blind closed. Barely looking at anything but the desert rose door, I slammed my hand down on it once and wasn't surprised when it opened under the weight of my gesture. I stepped into the dimness of an unlit room and stared at the woman sitting on the bed.

As long as I'd known her, Hyacinth had always been flamboyant. She was in-your-face drag, always perfectly coifed and bejeweled as befitted a true queen. She wouldn't go out in public without being made up to within an inch of her Mardi Gras roots. The girl always swore she was born during Carnivale and planned to die the same way. I might be shorting those dreams if I didn't get some answers today.

But the Hyacinth who stared back at me, in no way resembled a Mardi Gras queen. She was disheveled, her wig askew. What little makeup was left on her dark face, was smeared and clotted around her eyes and mouth. The expression inside those eyes was...nonexistent...empty.

Ice water rolled down my spine. I stopped at the foot of the rumpled bed with the cheap bedspread. "What the hell is going on?"

When she finally answered me, her voice had none of the verve

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

and sass it usually held. It was a flat monotone. There was no mistaking this was a man in front of me. A broken man, as far as I could tell.

“They have Taz. They’re going to kill him.”

“Whoa,” I said, raising my hand. “Back up a minute, sister. Who has Taz?”

“Them. They took him and told me I had to help them, else they’d kill him.”

“Hey, *la bas*,” I said softly, mimicking something she often said to me. I needed to break through her near catatonia and find out what was going on. “Hy, it’s me, Wager. Your J-man.”

Those empty eyes came up and met mine. “Do you know where Taz is?”

“No hon, I don’t. Why don’t you tell me about it. What happened?” I sat on the bed, being careful not to jostle her. Gently, I took her hand in mine. Her fingers were like ice, her usually immaculate nails cracked and in some cases, broken off altogether. How long had she been here like this? I wanted to shake her, but that might have sent her off the deep end altogether, and I didn’t dare risk that. I was here with a purpose, and no matter how broken Hyacinth was, she owed me some answers.

“I need you to tell me what happened, Hy. Focus.” I raised my voice, trying to pierce her strange apathy. “If Taz is in trouble, I want to help you.”

That broke through. I saw a spark of life in her dark eyes. But it wasn’t hope at my words, it was raw hate. “You want to help Taz? Then die. You and your basta cop son. Then they will let Taz go.”

Her hands were like claws in mine. She dug broken nails into my wrists and wouldn’t let me go when I pulled back.

“You were supposed to be the one blamed for killing that rat.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Arbi said if your cop son hadn't pushed, no one would have looked at him and his brothers. But you had to screw it all up."

I wasn't following her. Who was Arbi, and what had I screwed up, and how was Mark involved? Since when did Mark push anything for me? She didn't know what she was talking about.

"Najarian was a traitor. He never should have rolled on his brother. You don't do that to blood."

Najarian.? I had to search for the name. Oh shit, she meant Bunny. "Who the hell is Arbi?"

"Arbi Najarian. The Armenian boss."

"And his brother was Bunny? He was *gay*?" I could just imagine how that would go over with one of those Eastern European families. "What did they do, kick him out?"

"They disowned him. But then he went on the street, and when the police threw his ass in jail, he rolled on the family and got a sweetheart deal. Once Arbi found out, he had him executed. You were supposed to go to jail for that, and there would be no heat on the family."

"And since I didn't, they came after me?"

"They went after Taz!"

"Why didn't you come to me and tell me what was going on? I would have helped you. Hell, even Mark would have helped."

"You don't get it, do you." She raised those haunted eyes to meet mine. I've never seen a face so empty. "No one goes to the police on Arbi. You have no idea how ruthless he is. Him and his boys will kill everyone involved with you as easy as they step on a roach."

I froze, my mouth coming open as I tried to catch my breath. Everyone? What did that mean? Was Mark still in danger? What about— Shit. I thought about Tyler, sitting up alone in that big

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

house in the hills, with nothing but Columbo to watch over him. I grabbed Hy's shoulders and hauled her around to face me.

"Where is he, Hy? Where is this guy?"

"You think I know? I've never met any of them. I don't even know how they got Taz. All I know is they sent me a message and video that..." Her voice broke. "It was horrible. They're monsters. They told me they'd send him back to me in parts if I didn't find you and tell them where you were going to be. What choice did I have?"

"You always have a choice!"

"Who are you to judge? Has there ever been anyone you cared enough about to die for? I would die for Taz. He would die for me. He nearly did, more than once."

I remembered the bloody knife and Hyacinth's messed-up face, beaten bloody by someone who hated her for the simple fact of who and what she was. And Taz, who might weigh a hundred pounds wet, had gone after the attacker to defend his lover.

No, Hyacinth was right, I'd never felt like that for anyone. I wasn't sure I was capable of that level of love. What kind of loser did that make me?

"So you have no idea where they might have Taz?"

"No." Hy hung her head, her frazzled, once-proud wig falling forward over her face. She pushed it back and it tilted, threatening to fall off altogether. I caught a glimpse of the short dark nap underneath. Her eyes were hollow sockets smeared with mascara and makeup.

I no longer wanted to kill her for what she had done. Somehow, I suspected she was already living in her own hell, knowing what she had brought about, unable to stop it or save her lover. I took her hand again and squeezed it.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Go on, love,” I said. “Why don’t you take a shower, fix yourself up. I need to make some phone calls.”

She looked alarmed. “Who are you going to call? You can’t call the police. They’ll kill him for sure.”

“It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think? Besides, it’s not the police I’m going to call, it’s Mark. He’s already put himself out on a limb for me on this. He’s not going to risk Taz once he knows what the deal is.”

“Mark did that for you? Why? I thought he despised you.”

“He did...does. But he’s still my son, and I’m still his father, and that’s proving to be thicker than anything else.” I pushed her toward the bathroom. “Go on, take your shower. I’ll be here when you come out.”

After a few more minutes of coaxing and ordering, she finally stumbled into the bathroom with a robe and a bag of toiletries that was larger than any suitcase I’ve ever owned. Almost immediately, I heard the shower go on.

I pulled out my phone then. I had two calls to make. I made the easy one first.

Tyler answered on the second ring. His voice clammed up the minute he realized it was me. “You decided to call, did you? I’ve been trying to reach you all day.”

I remembered shutting off the phone while I was in the car. Oops. “Sorry about that. I got...busy.”

“Doing what? More sneaky-pete stuff? You’re not a cop, you know. Not even a PI. So what do you think you’re doing with all this cloak-and-dagger stuff except putting yourself in harm’s way?”

I wanted to ask him if the idea of me being in harm’s way bothered him or the idea I might be hurt. I didn’t ask either.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Instead, I cut off his diatribe and blurted, "I found her."

I could almost hear the air leave his lungs. His next words were little more than a whisper. "Is she okay? Did you... Tell me you didn't hurt her."

"No, I didn't. In fact, she's in the shower right now, and we'll be heading back home soon."

"Back—where are you?"

I told him. He blew up.

"And how did you get there? Don't tell me, you stole another car. Jesus, Wager, you want to spend the rest of your life in jail? Do you have a death wish?"

"I had to get here. She called, she was in trouble, and I had to come. What was I going to do, borrow your car?"

He abandoned that line of criticism and instead asked, "So what's the story with her? Did she set you up? And if she did, why?"

"She did. But she didn't think she had a choice."

"How's that? Who doesn't have a choice like that?"

So I told him about the Armenian mob, Bunny's connection to it, and the reason for his death and what they had done to Taz to turn Hy into a rat for them.

"What are you going to do? They won't stop. They'll keep after all of you."

I wasn't going to tell him they might decide to go after him, too, then I thought how unfair that was. A man should know when he's in danger. How else can he protect himself? "You have any more firearms in the house?"

"What the hell kind of question is that? You want to borrow one? Forget it. My firearms are all registered, and I'm not putting them in anyone's hands but mine."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

"I don't want one of your guns." Truth was, I wasn't sure I'd know how to use one. "But this is important, Tyler."

"What is going on, John?"

"It's the Armenians who are doing this. The boy—Daron—was the brother of the Armenian mob boss. He turned informant on them when they booted him out for being gay, so they killed him."

"That's terrible," Tyler said. "That poor boy. Bad enough when your family rejects you...but kill you. Terrible."

I agreed it was terrible. "It gets worse. They meant to frame me for it, so no suspicion would fall on them. When that didn't work, they needed to take me down, too. So they kidnapped Taz and forced Hyacinth to find me for them. They're after all of us now."

"Are you going to the police about this?"

Ah my naïve, sweet Tyler, still thought the world could be saved by the boys in blue. I took a deep breath and said, "They may be coming after you, too."

Silence filled the space between us. I could hear his soft breathing, then there was a hitch and he said, "What did you say?"

"They're going to try to take out all of us. You have to be ready for them."

"How can I be ready for people who set off pipe bombs? Damn, I thought I left that kind of shit behind in Iraq." There was an edge to his voice. He was getting angry. I wished there weren't over a hundred miles between us so I could have offered him physical comfort. I had gotten the guy into this mess, and I wasn't even in a place I could get him out of it. As if I'd be any more qualified to fight the mob than he was. At least he was armed.

"I'm going to call Mark. He can let the people he thinks can help know what's going on. At least, I hope he can. Listen," I tried not to let the urgency show in my voice. "Is there someplace you

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

can go? Take Columbo and go visit your family, or get a hotel room.”

“I’m not bringing this shit down on my family.” He was silent for a minute. “I’ve got a forces buddy I can stay with. It’s too late to call him tonight, but I can talk to him tomorrow. He won’t like what I’m messed up in, but he’ll watch my back. Are you coming back to town?”

“We’ll be leaving soon, once I talk to Mark.”

“Well, I’ll wait for you then.” His voice softened. “But you take care, John. I... just take care, okay?”

I had no idea what he’d been about to say, and I wasn’t about to ask in case my first suspicion was right. What Tyler was doing was definitely not the smartest thing, and there was no way I was going to encourage him. I had been a loser when I met him and that hadn’t changed in the last forty-eight hours. All he had to do was ask my son.

I hung up after reassuring him I would take care of both of us. I sat in the gloomy room, listening to the shower in the background, and thought dark thoughts.

CHAPTER 14

I went for a walk after Hyacinth finished her shower and kicked me out of the room so she could “get ready,” she told me with her old imperialism. Since I had no idea what that entailed, I was happy to leave. I found a Starbucks half a block from the motel and ordered a grande mocha latte. It wasn’t until the barista served my drink and stared at me like I’d spouted two heads that I remembered I hadn’t shaved or even brushed my hair in something like two days. I could only imagine what a horror I looked like. It was surprising Hyacinth had let me in the motel room.

I grimaced at my image in the window by the table where I found a seat. Rescuing a *Desert Sun* someone had discarded, I buried my nose in it and took my time finishing my coffee. How long did it take a disheveled, overwrought drag queen to get herself

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

back to normal? Given I'd never seen Hyacinth in anything but drag, I had no idea. I wouldn't have known what she looked like when she was Remy Delafloate. I was a ten-minutes-in-the-morning type guy—shit, shower and shave—so I had no point of reference.

Coffee done and getting more and more dirty looks from the staff and customers, I hit the street again. A glance at my watch told me maybe half an hour had passed. Too early, I was sure. I headed the other way. The liquor store, another half block down, beckoned me and I succumbed, coming out with a six-pack of Bud and a box of sugar donuts that would have gone better with the latte. Then I trudged back to the motel, knocked tentatively on the door and was told in a familiar patois to come in.

I found Hyacinth sitting regally in the only chair in the room, putting the finishing touches to her dragon-length nails, now fully restored to their former glory.

She barely looked up at my entrance. When she did, her eyes lit on the beer and donuts.

“Is that for me?”

“For us,” I said.

“Boy, I smelled the shine on you the minute you came busting down my door earlier. You don't need no more alcohol if you driving.”

“Why would I be driving? It's your car out there.”

“What about your car?”

“Didn't bring my car.” I let that sink in until realization hit her, then I grinned. “I borrowed one, and I thought I'd leave it here for the next person.”

“You're wicked, boy.”

“Ain't that the truth, girlfriend.”

She stared wistfully at the beer. “So I guess I'm driving.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I handed her the box of sugar donuts after I liberated one. Already my fingers were dusted with powdered sugar, and it was getting all over my pant legs. Once I swallowed the last bite, I popped the top off the Bud and chugged half.

“Yeah, sugar,” I agreed. “You’re driving.”

While she packed the few things she had brought with her when she fled the horror she had helped bring about, I made the last phone call.

He must have recognized the caller ID because he picked it up on the first ring and snapped, “Where are you, and what are you doing?”

“I found her, she’s with me and I’m bringing her back.”

Sheer awe at what I had accomplished kept him speechless. At least, that’s the illusion I maintained until he opened his mouth and started screaming, “What the hell kind of idiot are you, Dad? You weren’t supposed to go anywhere without telling me, you sure as hell weren’t supposed to find the suspect yourself. Are you trying to get killed? There are far easier suicides if that’s what you’re looking for. If you want, I can recommend a few.”

“A simple you’re welcome would have sufficed.”

He snarled something I didn’t get, and I didn’t ask him to repeat it. I did hear his next sentence. “Okay, Dad, who is she, and what is going on?”

“Her name is Hyacinth DuPaul, and she’s being extorted by the Armenian Mafia to find me and set me up.”

“You realize you just told me nothing. Who is she? How is she being extorted? Does it mean anything that the boy in the motel was Armenian? Start with answers to those questions.”

I took a deep breath. Where to start? At the beginning, I guess. “Daron Najarian is the brother of the Mafia king pin—is that what

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

you call them? I picked him up at the Christopher Street West Gay Pride parade, and I took him to the Sunnyside Motel because we both wanted to get laid.” Nothing like bluntness to keep the emotions at bay. It was easier than remembering what it had been like strolling through the party streets anticipating what we had both eagerly wanted. “I got the room under the name Bob Smith, and we were given a room up the stairs and two doors down. We started fucking.” I paused and stared at the rumpled bed clothes, thinking of another bed and another motel room. “That’s when things get a bit hazy. Someone broke into the room, hit me upside the head with something, and I was out. I have no idea how long I was unconscious. When did the 911 call come in?”

“At three-oh-seven. Do you know what time you reached the motel?”

I shook my head, realized Mark couldn’t see me and muttered, “I don’t really know. I got to the parade around noon. I was probably there”—I didn’t say cruising— “about forty-fifty minutes before I met Bu—Daron. We pretty much left right away, though I did stop to say hello to your partner. It would have taken us at least fifteen minutes to reach my car and get to the motel.”

“That means you got to the motel around two. Does that seem right?”

“I guess. So what, that means I was unconscious for at least an hour? What about Daron?”

“What about him? He was dead when the first responders arrived. ME later determined he hadn’t been dead more than an hour, probably a lot less. His liver temp was pretty much within normal range.”

“So he still might have been alive while I lay there?”

How did he keep his voice so cool when he was discussing

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

something so terrible? “That’s entirely possible. Could you have made a difference? I don’t think so. Is that any consolation?”

“No,” I said softly.

“Didn’t think so. All you have to do is learn to live with that. Okay, what then? What happened when you woke up and realized he was dead?”

“I heard police sirens. I panicked and ran. I went to your mother’s and borrowed some money and got my clothes. I’m sure she told you that.”

“Yes, what then? When did you meet your boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. I drove to Ferndell and left the Monte Carlo with the keys in the ignition so somebody would jack it, threw my jeans in a trash can, and that’s when I met up with Tyler.”

He interrupted me. “Where was this trash can? What side of the road? Were there picnic tables around it? A washroom? How far off the road did you park the car? Do you know the plate number?”

I answered him as best I could. “But I wasn’t expecting to go back there, so I wasn’t paying a lot of attention.”

“Fine, then what?”

“We spent a few hours at his place before he called you. I’m sure you don’t want the details of what we did...”

“No, that’s okay. When you say you met up with Taylor, you mean you knew him? You had arranged this meeting?”

“You mean Tyler, and no, nothing like that. I swear to you, we never met before that day.” God, the last thing I wanted to do was get Tyler in trouble for aiding and abetting. I sighed. “All right, we met because his dog came over and pissed on my leg. He felt so bad, and he wanted to help me—”

“And you were only too glad to let him ‘help,’ right? Same old

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Wager.”

“Yeah, your old man’s a piece of work. We can both agree on that. But trust me, he had no clue about anything until he caught the news and saw my picture plastered all over the place. That’s when he pulled that cannon on me and called you.”

Mark snorted. “That ‘cannon’ was a Beretta 92. It has a five-inch barrel and weighs about thirty-four ounces. Now, your typical cannon—”

“Okay, okay, point made. I know squat about guns. I only know the thing that was pointed at me was very persuasive.”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” I swear he was laughing at me. Always glad to know I could still amuse. “But don’t stop there. What did you do after I left you on the side of the road?”

“Made my way to a motel where I passed out. Hyacinth found me there the next day and delivered me to Venice. She said she was going to find a place for me to crash. I guess she went to her Armenian bosses, instead, and told them where I was going to be at seven-thirty, giving them plenty of time to come and rig their bomb...” My voice trailed off as the horror washed back over me, undiminished by time. “And all those people died. That little girl.”

“I’m sorry you were there. I am glad you weren’t hurt, and I’m even more sorry about those people who died. But we’re doing our best to find the ones who did it. Maybe once this Hyacinth is interviewed, something new will come to light.”

“Something you should know, Mark,” I said. “Hyacinth is not what she seems...then again, maybe she’s exactly what she seems. I guess it just depends on what you’re seeing.”

“What are you talking about, Dad? Will you talk straight?”

“That’s the trouble...she’s not straight, and she’s not actually a she.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“If she’s not a she what is—oh wait, she’s one of those transgender, transvestite people?”

“She’s a drag queen, Mark. A very good one, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh.”

Wow, for the first time in his life, my son was speechless. And he hadn’t even met Hyacinth yet. This was going to be priceless. The bathroom door opened; Hyacinth came out. Her Jimmy Choos tapped the thin carpet, and I looked up at her.

“Gotta go, Mark. We’ll be back in two or three hours. Where do you want to meet up?”

“I don’t know yet. Call me on the way.”

“In an hour.”

I hung up and followed Hyacinth out the door to her Kia, where I crammed in myself and the luggage, not for the first time wondering how the hell she got in and out of her own car. Could have been worse I guess. She could have driven one of those smart cars.

She pulled out of the parking lot into light traffic. The time worked for us—it was late enough that traffic stayed light all the way into L.A.

At the halfway point, I called Tyler again. “Hi, Tyler. I’d like to meet up with Mark at your place. I’m going to have Hyacinth with me. That okay with you?”

He agreed, though I heard reluctance in his voice. I dismissed it and found myself looking forward to getting back to his place. My God, I missed the man. I seriously needed to get out of Dodge.

Next, I called Mark.

“We’re on our way to Tyler’s place. Can you meet us there in...” I looked around and tried to get my bearings. We were

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

entering suburban landscape so we must have been hitting San Bernadino or Pomona. "Maybe an hour."

"I'll be there," he said and disconnected. No conversationalist, my son. Sadly, I wished his mother had taken after him.

When we pulled in to Tyler's, Mark's Corvette was already in the drive. For reasons I refused to examine, I was glad to see it there. I waited for Hyacinth to get out of the car and walked with her to the front door. This time I knocked, and the door swung open, minus rifle. A smiling Tyler greeted us.

I intro'd the two, and we all filed into the living room where Mark already sat in a chair looking decidedly uncomfortable. He wasn't drinking, though I saw Tyler had set a beer beside his chair.

Hyacinth sat on the sofa, and I dropped beside her. When Tyler offered us drinks, we both said yes, thank you. Hyacinth wanted a mimosa; I asked for beer.

Tyler vanished into the kitchen. Columbo waddled into the room and made a beeline for me. Hyacinth watched in horror as the dog sprawled across my stocking feet and let out a deep-throated groan of contentment.

"What in Jesus' name is that thing?"

"It's a dog, Hy."

"That sir, is no dog. I know dogs. My uncle owned coonhounds, and that does not look like any coonhound I ever cottoned to, less you took one and chopped its legs off at the knees."

"Isn't coonhound kind of a racist name?" I asked sweetly.

"Not if it's hunting raccoons." Then she leaned over and said just as sweetly, "So that's your boyfriend, eh? Isn't he a little old for you?"

"He's not old. He's, like, my age."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“My point exactly. Isn’t he a little old for you?”

“He’s not old, and he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Whatever you say, sugar,” Hyacinth said.

“Can we please stop the chit chat and get down to business?” Mark said. “Mr...Ms...DuPaul—”

“Oh please, sugar, call me Hy.”

Mark’s teeth ground together so loudly I heard them from where I was sitting. His jaw clenched and unclenched. Couldn’t be good for his teeth. “Ms. Hyacinth, I want you to tell me everything you know about these Armenians and the threats they made against you and...Taz. Is that the name of your, ah, friend?”

“He’s not my friend, Officer Wager, he’s my husband, my life partner, my lover. Don’t insult us by calling him my friend.”

“Then your husband, Taz, what exactly happened to him?”

“He was taken.”

“By who?”

“You mean whom, don’t you?”

“Whom, who, I don’t give a fuck, lady. Tell me what happened to him.”

Yep, Mark was definitely losing his cool. The last couple of days had been as much a strain on him as they had been on me. We hadn’t spent this much time together since the last summer before his mother and I called it quits.

“He was just gone. He was helping you, remember, J-Man?” She caught my eye and pursed her painted lips. “He never came back.”

Shit, that was when he took the car I had boosted out to South Central to dump it. Had he been grabbed out there?

“Two hours later, I got this.” With shaking hands Hyacinth drew her cell phone out of her clutch, found something on it and

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

handed it to Mark. I stood up and went over to crouch beside him to see what she had handed him. “That was right after I dropped you on the boardwalk.”

It was an unmistakable picture of Taz looking battered and defiant as only the cocky rooster of a man could do. His hands were shackled behind him, and he was kneeling on a floor someplace unidentifiable. There was a text message along with it. I wasn’t close enough to read it, but I didn’t need to. Clearly, it was the first of their demands.

“They sent more. Then they sent the last one, telling me what I must do.” She kept her eyes on the floor, not looking at Mark or me. “They made it clear what they would do to him if I refused or went to the police.”

Mark read through the text messages she had gotten over the course of less than a day, and his face grew grimmer and grimmer. I wanted to ask him what the messages said, but knew I’d only get an “it’s police business” dismissal, so I didn’t bother. My son learned his stubbornness from his mother.

CHAPTER 15

“You should have brought this to the police,” Mark said.

“They would kill him then. The messages make that clear.”

“They always say that, ah, Hyacinth. It’s a standard ploy with kidnappers.”

I wanted to point out that these kidnappers had gone on to blow up a taco stand and kill fifteen people. Not standard anything, I was sure.

“What would the police have done?”

“Both the LAPD and our department have connections in Little Armenia. We know people and can find out what we need to know. But without your intel, we didn’t know anything. We were operating blind, so the trail of the bombers is now cold.”

“Hardly cold,” I said, pissed that he was laying the blame for

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

this mess on a woman who had already been victimized. “You already told me the signature of the device pointed to the Armenians. What else did you need?”

“Some corroborating evidence would have been nice. We didn’t have enough to move on them with just the bomb fragments. The Armenians are smart and not easily caught. Hyacinth’s information might have helped more than you could ever know.”

“Stop berating her, Mark. She did what she thought she had to do.”

“Does that include almost getting the both of us killed along with those other fifteen? Including three children? Or have you forgotten them all of a sudden?”

“I’m sure no one has forgotten them,” Tyler said. He leaned forward in his chair, his intense gaze moving from one of us to the other, finally settling on me. His eyes were warm, and I squirmed in my seat. “Who could? But beating each other up helps no one.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?” Mark growled.

“Share knowledge,” he said. “You obviously know a lot about the criminal element we’re dealing with. Hyacinth has had the most recent contact with them. Your bomb squad dealt with the physical evidence.”

“Not my bomb squad. The LAPD has jurisdiction in Venice.”

Tyler dismissed the jurisdictional quibble with the wave of a hand. “Still, you are familiar with the players and their methods, and you mentioned a knowledge of Little Armenia. I confess I know next to nothing about it. I know where it is, and that’s about it.”

“East Hollywood,” Mark said. “Specifically east of Vermont and south of Hollywood Boulevard. South of Thai Town.”

“From your experience, do you believe they would hold this

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

man somewhere down there?”

I don't know if Tyler was trying to flatter Mark, or he really thought my son was both that smart and that knowledgeable. I'd already seen how much faith he put in cops, so maybe he did believe his words. Certainly, my son liked the verbal stroking.

“Arbi might. It's in his comfort zone, and that's often important.” He stood up. “Let me make a phone call. I know an officer who's part of the local gang unit. She works on the Armenian plate.”

He left the room, and we fell into a wait mode, no one quite willing to break the uncomfortable silence. Tyler leaned back on the sofa beside me, making sure his shoulder and hips touched mine. I saw Hy glance our way and look both smug and sad. I prayed we could make this all work out and that she would get back Taz. I liked the little Puerto Rican elf lord. He was good people, and there aren't too many of them anymore.

When Tyler reached over and twined his fingers through mine, I didn't pull away. Normally I would have. I'm not a big touchy-feely guy when I'm not fucking or looking forward to a fuck. But it felt nice. Reassuring. I glanced down at Columbo, still snoring into my toes, and felt an odd comfort I didn't think I'd ever felt. Before I could decide whether I liked it or not, Mark was back looking self-satisfied. He barely even glanced at the interlaced fingers lying on my thigh.

“She's pretty sure she knows where Arbi and his other brothers are.”

“You mean there're more of them?” Suddenly it seemed overwhelming. A whole clan of militant, blood-thirsty Najarian's on the prowl, looking for people to mess up. This did not paint a pretty picture.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Robin say there are three brothers besides the dead one. He was the youngest, by the way. Arbi is the oldest, of course. He took over the gang when his father was assassinated last year by a rival group. There was some speculation at the time that Arbi was behind his death, but nothing was ever proved. I guess at one time, LAPD was worried about a full-blown gang war, but so far it’s been peaceful. At least till this.”

“Robin?” I remember Mark calling me Robin the first time I had called him after Bunny’s murder. A fellow officer, huh? “She a friend of yours?”

He speared me with a look. “Yes, she’s a friend. What’s the relevance?”

“None.” I smiled. “How does this information help us?”

“She’s going to put out some feelers, talk to a few people she knows. Maybe somebody’s seen something in the last few hours that they didn’t notice before that will mean something now that we have new information.” His glare moved from me to Hyacinth. “This is why it’s important to share everything. Sometimes what you know seems like nothing, but when it’s combined with something someone else knows, bang, you’ve got a winner.”

“So you’re feeling a bang moment here? What is Robin going to do if she confirms Arbi’s location? Can she act on it?”

“So far, the bombing is being classified as gang related. At one point, they were going to put it in the domestic terrorist category. That would have brought in Homeland Security. But right now, it’s being handled locally. If the LAPD puts it back into a terrorist threat, they can act quickly.”

“Which means what for Taz? Is anyone going to look for him?” I said with some exasperation. I hate it when people don’t answer my questions. “Is anyone doing anything about him?”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Someone is working on it, Dad. It’s not like LAPD can just go storming through Little Armenia like they’re an occupying army without labeling the Armenians terrorists. And they’re reluctant to do that just yet. They need a solid lead before they can get anything like a no-knock warrant.”

“No-knock warrant?” Tyler looked confused. “What is that?”

“When the police can enter a residence without announcing themselves,” Mark said. “It has to be a very dangerous situation for that to happen.”

“Say it,” I muttered, knowing Mark wouldn’t. No cop wanted to talk about it. “Not since the riots and the Rampart scandal, right? You guys got smeared good on that mess. Now they got you all on a tight leash.”

“Those were unfortunate circumstances,” Mark said stiffly.

Beside me, Tyler nodded. “They were, indeed. It’s good to see the police are more respectful of citizens’ rights, now.”

I swear Mark was rolling his eyes while keeping a straight face and not letting on to Tyler what he really thought. I could see the wheels turning in his head. Another God-damn liberal. I’d heard him grouse often enough about them and other soft do-gooders who were ruining the country. I had always stayed uninvolved in his rants.

When Hy bolted upright, and I caught sight of the wildness on her face, I barely had time to brace for the explosion. I tightened my grip on Tyler’s hand.

“What the fuck are you assholes doing? Didn’t I tell you they got Taz? They’re going to *kill* him. When are you going to stop all this jawing, and go out and find him?”

“We’re working on the best way to do that, Hyacinth,” Mark said.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Hyacinth rolled right over him. “You ain’t doing squat. Get off your skinny white ass, and get down there and make someone tell you where that Armenian ’hole is.”

“No one down there is going to talk to any of us.”

But Hyacinth wasn’t listening. “If you won’t do something, I will. I’ll go down there. Let them ignore me.”

Under any other circumstances, I would have found that statement hilarious. Whatever else might happen, if Hyacinth showed up, no one was going to ignore her. You put a six-five drag queen in hot orange Jimmy Choos, black mesh stockings, pink booty shorts and a frilly yellow blouse, and she’s going to stand out anywhere she goes. But right now, I wasn’t laughing. In alarm, I threw Mark a warning look.

He was ignoring me. I went with the direct approach. “She means it, you know.”

Mark blinked and met my gaze. His eyes narrowed. “No, she can’t do that.” In the stress of the moment, he no longer hesitated in calling Hyacinth “she.” My boy was growing up. Mark directed his next words right to Hy. “You can’t go down there. You risk too much, not the least of which is getting both of you killed. We won’t be able to protect you if you go there on your own.”

“I don’t want your fucking protection. Taz and I never expected anything from five-oh. No one protected us, ’cept us. That ain’t changed.”

Mark’s face hardened. “Don’t do it, ma’am. I mean it.”

Hyacinth’s look plainly said “Fuck you.” Mark growled his frustration. I knew he wanted to grab Hy and shake some sense into her, but one thing my boy wasn’t, was suicidal. Instead, he bolted to his feet and snapped, “Everybody stay put.” He glared at me, then Tyler. “Don’t let anyone leave. Don’t let *her* leave.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“We won’t,” Tyler said.

I was grateful Hyacinth made no move to get up. She sat regally in her chair, looking cool and haughty. Her eyes never met ours, but I knew she was all too aware of everything going on around her.

This time, Mark took twenty minutes, but when he returned, he had a buoyancy to his step. “We’re good to go. Robin is going to meet me down in Little Armenia. She has a few contacts there she can talk to. She’s going out on a limb for me...” He broke off as though he realized what he had just admitted to. He met my gaze and flushed. “But she’s good people. A damn good cop, too.”

I was glad for him. I hoped it worked out better than what his mother and I had. But I could hardly tell him that. The last thing my son wanted was the approval of his old man, the loser.

Hyacinth broke through and brought us back to the matter at hand. “So what are you going to do for me, cop man?”

“I’m going to leave you here,” Mark said. “I’m going to go down to Little Armenia with another cop, and if your Taz is there, I will find him. And you”—he glared at Hy—“are going to sit right here and wait for me.”

I rolled my eyes. Did he really think that kind of macho bullshit was going to make Hyacinth toe the line? But then, he’d never had the pleasure of her presence before. Hy was unique in more ways than most. And she wasn’t a person to be underestimated.

Did I tell Mark any of that? Nah. He was going to have to find out about Hy all on his own.

So when Hy nodded, all meekness and innocence, I suppressed a smile. And Mark fell for it.

Nodding in satisfaction and throwing quick looks at the rest of us, he hurried out the door. I had to wonder whether his pace was

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

due to his excitement at the coming action or connecting with Robin. I seriously needed to meet this girl.

In the silence only punctuated by Columbo's gentle snores, Mark's Corvette fired up, and he roared out of the driveway. The sound soon faded into the night. None of us looked at each other.

Hyacinth stood, tottering a minute on her spikes, then snatched her clutch. "Don't try to stop me. Nothing you can say is going to make any difference."

I sighed and stood, too. "I know, hon." I stared up at the ceiling and sighed again. "I'm going with you."

"This is ridiculous," Tyler said. "You can't think you can walk down there and accomplish anything except getting killed."

"We gotta try."

"No, you don't."

I appreciated Tyler's fear for me. But there was no way in hell I was letting Hy go down there alone. Tyler had to see that.

Or maybe he did, and that's what he was afraid of.

I had a thought. "I'm not going anywhere in that thing you drive."

"Nothing wrong with my car," Hyacinth said.

"Except it stands out like a pink poodle at a pit bull party."

Silence for a second.

"You can take my Beemer," Tyler said.

We both looked at him. "You're sure?" I asked.

"You have to promise you're going to come back. That's all I ask."

"I'll make sure he returns, sugar," Hyacinth said. "Count on it."

Knowing it was probably the dumbest thing I had ever done in a life full of doozies, I took the keys from Tyler, dropped a hasty kiss on his mouth and followed Hyacinth out the door.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Heat collected that day still shimmered off the blacktopped driveway. In contrast, a cool breeze blew from the hills over our heads, ruffling my uncombed hair and the frills of Hy's yellow silk shirt.

I drove. As I maneuvered around Hy's Kia, I glanced up at the front of the house. Hy caught my look. "Don't worry, sugar. Your boyfriend's going to be all right."

"He's not my boyfriend." I threw the car into drive and squealed down Mount Beacon.

Little Armenia was a small enclave in Eastern Hollywood that at one time had housed the largest population of Armenians in L.A. That number had been surpassed in recent years, but there remained a substantial presence, not including Arbi and his Armenian mobsters.

I wasn't all that familiar with the area. Sure, I went through it and drove the streets going elsewhere, but I had no connections down there, so I had never done business. From what I was learning, that was probably a good thing. If I had gone down there selling my ice or E, I might currently be residing under the L.A. river. Given the normal state of the river, that would mean I was in very small, dismembered pieces. For most of the year, the river consisted of a few noxious puddles waiting for someone to piss in them and freshen them up.

I realized once we were there, that I had no idea what we were looking for. Did Hy really think there was going to be a neon sign with an arrow saying, "Kidnapped Puerto Ricans here"? We drove down Hollywood, then cut over to Sunset down Normandie. I pulled off Sunset onto Edgemont and stopped in front of Kaiser Permanente.

For a minute, I considered getting out and walking, then

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

realized how ridiculous that idea was. I couldn't take Hyacinth out there. It would be like taking a giraffe to a penguin party. Beside me, Hyacinth grew restless.

"What are we waiting for, boy? Not gonna find nothing sitting here."

"No, we won't. But what do you think we're going to find out there? You really think anyone's going to talk to us. Us?"

"I'll make them talk."

"With what, girlfriend? Get their insteps with your Jimmy Choos? This was a really dumb idea, you know that, don't you?"

"Then why'd you come here with me?"

To keep you from getting yourself killed, you silly queen. But I kept the thought to myself. Instead, I repeated her favorite aphorism. "Girl, you ain't got the sense God gave a bed bug."

I put the car in gear and pulled a U-turn, heading back to Sunset. "I don't know what we're looking for, but keep your eyes open."

I'd never felt more useless than driving around Little Armenia with Hyacinth riding shotgun. I wasn't the least bit surprised when I saw Hyacinth's flamingo pink Kia coming down Alexandria. I pulled over to the curb and watched Tyler slide to a stop in front of me. We sat there for a while looking at each other through the windshields.

"Your boyfriend's following us," Hyacinth said.

"He's not my boyfriend." I climbed out of the BMW and met Tyler at the front bumper.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Same thing you are."

"Does that mean you know what it is?"

Tyler sighed. "I wish I did."

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

But I wasn't listening to him. Instead, I was watching a maroon Crown Victoria crawl down Alexandria toward us.

"It's a bloody clown convention," I muttered as Mark and a young, dark-haired woman climbed out of the unmarked police car.

Mark looked more disappointed than pissed. "Couldn't wait, could you? Just once, I wanted you to do the smart thing."

"You know me. Smart isn't part of my vocabulary." For the first time, flippant didn't work.

"Who are these people, Mark?" the female officer said. She stood close to Mark.

Let me guess. Robin. I met Mark's gaze. He knew I knew. "This is John Wager, my father. This is his friend, Tyler Rogers."

I noticed he didn't even look in the BMW at Hyacinth. I guess that was asking too much of him.

"So what's going on?" I asked. "You found something?"

Mark and Robin traded glances. He deferred to her, so I guessed she outranked him. Did that mean if he got hired by the LAPD, she'd be his superior officer? I was a bit surprised when she started talking. It's always been my experience that cops never talk to civilians.

"My informants put Arbi in a place next street over. He owns an apartment building known for crack sales and prostitution."

"Convenient that it's within spitting distance of Kaiser Permanente," I said, earning a dirty look from Mark. Robin did something my son never could: ignore me. She went on talking right over me.

"Our local CIs reported a flurry of activity around the place in the last forty-eight hours. Originally, we thought a drug deal was going down. Now, in light of what you've told us, we're thinking

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

it's something else. Vice has already made some substantial busts in Arbi's apartment over the last year or so—heroin, meth, some stolen Schedule II controlled substance. Now you're telling us he's holding a hostage and was directly responsible for the Venice Beach bombing. Have I got that right?"

"That's what I know," I said.

Robin shrewdly looked over at Hyacinth. "What is her involvement?"

"It's her husband who's being held hostage. Arbi was forcing her to lead him to me."

"Because you were involved in the death of Daron Najarian?"

"I... I was there. I wasn't involved in it. That's all. Mark must have told you."

"He did. That's a sheriff's department case. Najarian is ours."

"Then go get him."

She frowned. "I need to talk to my informants first. We're not sure he's there at this point."

"How long is that going to take?"

"I can't say. Can I make a suggestion, Mr. Wager? Go home. You and your friends. This is not a good place for you to be."

Oh lady, I wish we could. I smiled at her and nodded.

Mark leaned over and whispered in her ear. She frowned.

"Did he tell you I won't leave?" I asked sweetly.

Her frown deepened, and she threw Mark a look as though to say, "Really, who is this guy?"

Hyacinth couldn't have chosen a worse moment to emerge from the car. I don't know how much Mark had told Robin about Hy, but I saw her eyes widen as Hy unfolded...and kept unfolding until she towered over all of us. Her hot orange shoes tapped impatiently as she folded her arms over her cosmetically enhanced

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

and very impressive chest.

Out of all of us, Mark was the only one who could possibly appreciate her attributes. I know they didn't do anything for me, and I doubted Tyler was stirred, either.

Two women and a baby stroller came down the sidewalk at that moment. The younger of the two, pushing the stroller, caught sight of Hyacinth and froze, her mouth open in soundless surprise. The older woman, gray haired and stooped, was talking nonstop until she noticed her companion's reaction. When she looked up and got an eyeful of Hy, she crossed herself and stared in awe at the tableau we created.

"So much for keeping a low profile," Mark muttered.

Robin turned away to answer her cell. Her conversation was short. When she turned back, she said brusquely, "Najarian's onsite. Backup's on its way with the no-knock warrant. It might take a few hours."

"I'm not waiting that long," Hyacinth said. She moved as though she was going to march right over there. "We go now."

"No, you don't go," Robin said. "You go home. All of you. Officer Wager and myself will go, as a joint LAPD/LASO venture. Other officers will be joining us." She put unnecessary emphasis on "officers."

Tyler came up and put his hand on my shoulder. "I think we should go, John. Let the professionals do their job. We can go back to my place, maybe grab a bite to eat. They're right, we can't do anything here."

"Listen to him, Dad," Mark said. "I'll call you. I promise. Ms. Hyacinth, please."

"I need to see Taz." Hy was nothing if not stubborn. She could make a bulldog look indecisive.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“You will, hon,” Tyler said. “But we need to let the cops do what they do best. We’d only get in their way. And that would hurt Taz.”

Tyler was a lot more persuasive than I could ever be. Hy was actually listening to him. Finally, she cocked her head at him, threw a sly glance at me and said loudly enough for everyone on the street to hear, “So, boyfriend, you going to be good to my man? He’s sweet on you, you know. Anyone can see it.”

Damned if Tyler didn’t blush. I didn’t know men could do that. He tossed me a pleading look, and I shrugged. It was just Hy. She liked to be outrageous.

“Though damned if I know what you see in him.” Hyacinth didn’t know when to quit.

“That’s enough, Hy,” I said, taking her arm and steering her back to the BMW. “Tyler’s right. We need to go...” God, I’d been about to say home. How weird was that. I was thrown, which maybe explained why I was so short with Hy. “We’re going, Hy. Stop arguing. Taz is going to be okay.”

Hyacinth followed me to the car so meekly, I was immediately suspicious. But she tucked herself into the seat and clipped on the seatbelt, folding her talon-like nails in her lap. She blinked mascaraed and kohled eyes at me. The door clinked when I shut it and fired up the engine. The car was as smooth as anything I had ever driven. If things had been different, I might have appreciated being behind the wheel of such a kickass vehicle, but too much had happened over the last few days.

I waited for Tyler to pull out and make a U-turn and head north toward Hollywood. I followed, flipping Mark and Robin a fingertip wave as we passed. It wasn’t returned.

We had barely passed Western on Franklin, and I was going to

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

turn right on Canyon, when Hy put her hand on my arm. “I think I want to go home. Can you call Tyler and have him bring the car around? You two can ride back to his place together.”

“What? Are you sure, hon? You should be around friends instead of waiting alone.”

She shook her head. “I want to go home.”

I tried to talk her out of it, but she was stubborn. Finally, I called Tyler’s cell and relayed Hyacinth’s wish. He said he’d meet us there.

Hyacinth and Taz lived in a pretty, pink stucco apartment on the edge of Hollywood and West Hollywood. I never asked Hy where their money came from since I knew she didn’t work beyond the odd drag show, and she never volunteered the information. Once I had heard a rumor that her family back in the bayou had money, and she had some kind of trust fund. Or maybe Taz was some Puerto Rican tycoon who had just lucked into loving a six-foot-five black man masquerading as a goddess.

Tyler got there ahead of us, and he was leaning against the bumper of the Kia, looking out of place in his Hollywood player suit, being cruised by a few hustlers who had strayed off the Boulevard in search of fresh meat.

I parked the Beemer behind him, and Hy scuttled out. “Better go save your boyfriend there, lover.”

“He’s not my boyfriend—” But she was gone amid a cloud of Chanel No. 5. She clattered past Tyler with a wave of her hand. Tyler waved back, tossed her the keys and trotted over to where I was parked. When I moved to get out, he motioned me to stay.

“You drive.” He sank into the bucket seat beside me and reached out to take my hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

At least he didn’t say let’s go home.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I put the car in gear and headed back for the hills.

CHAPTER 16

We were subdued when Tyler let us in. Even Columbo's greeting was low key. He waddled after me and huddled close to my ankles whenever I stopped. Eventually, I gave up tripping over him and went to the TV room, where I sat on the sofa facing the big screen. Columbo sighed contentedly and pushed his head against my feet. Tyler came in moments later with two beers.

"Do you think they'll find him?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I can't imagine how Hy would react if they didn't." Actually that wasn't true. I could imagine all too well, and it was not a pretty picture.

"Call her later. Make sure she's okay."

Since I had already planned to do that, I merely nodded.

"You hungry?"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Maybe in a bit,” I said. I rubbed my face and grimaced. “First thing I need to do is get rid of this.”

He showed me where he kept his shaving gear and left me to it. When I came back out he looked at me approvingly. I scooped up my beer; he patted the seat beside him. “Sit down, you’re making me tired just watching you.”

I sat. He leaned his head against my shoulder. Looking down at the top of his head, I studied the tousled reddish hair, the delicate curve of his ear lobe. I reached around and stroked his other ear, tracing the outline of it.

“I want to fuck you.”

He looked up at me. “Yes,” was all he said.

I led him into the bedroom. Pushing him down on the nearly made bed, I undressed him, revealing skin one inch at a time, tasting each bit as I bared it. I took my time, and once I had pulled off the last shred of clothing, he was flushed and sweating, gripping my head so hard, he tore out hair as I worked my way up his legs to his thighs. I shoved my tongue up behind his balls, raising his legs over my shoulder to open him up to my probing.

My plan was to drive him to the brink of insanity, then when he was at the edge, throw him over. He was mewling helplessly, thrashing on the bed as I sucked his prick, tugging and pulling his balls and thrusting stiff fingers up inside him.

Saying goodbye the best and only way I knew how.

Because I understood that I had to get away from there. This whole thing was becoming too comfortable. I was enjoying it and Tyler way too much for my own good. In the end, I’d be sure to fuck it up. Better to walk away now, before that happened, and it got bitter and ugly.

It would be better for Tyler, too, though he might not know it

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

right now. He'd thank me in the end, when he was safely back in his own square, danger-free world taking care of business instead of trying to clean up the messes of a lifetime fuckup.

I pulled my mouth off his cock and nuzzled his sweaty balls, inhaling his musky uniqueness. He was shaking, tremors passing through his limbs, his balls tight against his scrotum and his meat throbbing under my lips. The hot flesh pulsed like a living thing.

His prick was slick with my spit and pre-cum, and it slipped in and out of my aching jaws as I worked him like I'd never worked anyone in my life. I sucked him to the brink, backed off, licked his thighs, his belly, fingered his tight hole, then circled his angry red helmet with my tongue. And listened to him gasp and moan in a desperate need for release I refused to give him. His fingers were talons, pulling at my hair, leaving bruises on my arms when I reached up to pinch his thick, swollen nipples.

I grabbed his hips in a vise-like grip and pinned him to the mattress as I began my final assault on him. I sucked him deep, vacuuming my lips around him and forcing away my gag reflex as I drove him down my throat again and again. This time, there would be no pulling away. I ignored his frantic efforts to back away, efforts he soon abandoned to sheer pleasure. He shouted my name, and I'm sure his toes curled as he exploded in my mouth, gouts of salty cum pulsing into me, a storm of cum I swallowed and drained from him until his softening cock slipped from me.

I leaned my forehead against his belly, feeling a pulse beat in his groin, listening to his shattered breathing slow and finally settle back to normal. Only then did I crawl up his body and flop over on my back, one arm thrown over my face, blocking out everything.

When he reached for me, I gently put him away.

"I need to call Hy. See how she's doing." I knew my voice

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

sounded distant, even cool. It wasn't what I felt, but it had to be this way.

"Uh, sure. Phone's right there—" He pointed to the bedside table.

"I'll take it out there." I climbed to my feet, glancing at his naked form lying on the rumpled covers, the sated, unaware expression on his face. Then I looked away. The entire room smelled of sweat and semen and Tyler. I had to get out of there.

I fled.

In the living room, I found his other phone and called Hyacinth's cell.

No answer. Pissed, I tried her land line, though I rarely used it. Hy took her cell with her everywhere. The hollow ringing of an unanswered phone droned on and on until the mechanical voice mail took over. I hung up without leaving a message. She had caller ID. She'd know who was calling her.

I tried the cell again. Still no answer. Again.

This time, instead of ringing, it went straight to voice mail. Either she was talking to someone else, or she had just shut off the phone.

Only one reason she'd shut off the thing.

Something rancid invaded my gut. I thought of her standing tall in Little Armenia, facing down two cops. Willing to stand down anybody who got between her and Taz.

I knew where she had gone.

"Shit." I slammed down the phone and raced back into the bedroom.

Tyler was still sprawled naked on the bed. He looked up at my entrance, and a smile lit up his plain face. "Hey there. Coming back to bed?"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Not now. I need your keys again. It’s important.” Meaning, don’t ask why.

Tyler did, anyway. “What is it? Something wrong?”

“I need to borrow the car once more.”

Tyler sat up, pulling the sheet around him. “I don’t understand...”

“I don’t either. But I’m afraid she’s done something stupid.”

“Stupid—you mean Hyacinth? What has she done?”

Knowing he wasn’t going to just hand over the keys, I gave him the short, sweet version. “I think she’s gone back.”

“Oh, shit,” Tyler said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Why would she do that? The cops told her how dangerous it is. She’s going to get hurt—”

Or worse. I held out my hand. “Please, I need the keys.”

“Are you going down there?”

I thought about lying, but really, no one was going to believe it. “Yes. I have to.”

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. “I’m coming with you. But before we go there, we need to do some research.”

“Research?” He lost me.

He hurriedly threw on a pair of jeans and a T, and led me into his office. He brought up Google again. “That girl, the LAPD officer, said there’d been several busts down there. My guess is that kind of stuff made the papers.”

“Yeah, so? What’s that got to do with us?”

“You want to know where this Arbi is, right? She said Arbi owned a building somewhere around there. I’m betting we can find out exactly where from the papers.”

Tyler worked his magic. Half an hour later, he sat back with a

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

tired grin.

“Tyler?”

“I got it. Mariposa Arms. Mariposa Avenue.”

I tried to talk him out of coming with me, but he was stubborn and, in the end, I ran out of time and gave in. He pulled on a pair of sturdy boots and led me out of the house. He drove down Canyon Road to the flats, and made our way over to Hy’s apartment on Lexington. There was no pink Kia parked in front of the place. The spot I had left it in was now occupied by a silver Volvo. I swore and smacked the dash. It was only what I’d expected, but it still rankled that I was right.

We drove around a few blocks, both of us looking for the vehicle. No luck.

We returned to Lexington, where Tyler double-parked in front of the courtyard. I stared past the screen of Bougainvillea at the door as though I could wish her to come through it. Instead, a young, lean-hipped, pale-faced kid of about seventeen trotted out of the building. He paused at the wrought-iron gate and smoothed his hand through his thick, bottle-streaked hair. Hy had told me more than once that both of her neighbors were sweet hustlers—Hy’s description—who were rarely there at night. This must have been one of them.

I jumped out of the Beemer. He looked up in alarm.

I cut to the chase. “You know Hyacinth? Big black lady, lives here with a little Puerto Rican guy. About this tall.” I held my hand up to my chin.

“You guys cops?” He peered into the car at Tyler.

“No. We’re not cops, trust me. But I need to find Hy. I’m a friend of hers.”

“Ain’t seen her in a while.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“How long’s a while? No, forget that. Have you seen anyone around who doesn’t belong?” I worried that Arbi had tracked her down to silence her for her part in the bombing. Since there were still some unidentifiable bodies from the explosion, they may have thought I was dead. But if they thought that, then Hyacinth became another liability.

Hy’s neighbor nodded. “There was a strange dude around a couple of hours ago. Someone I ain’t never seen before.”

“What did he look like?” I waited nervously for him to collect his thoughts and sort through them.

“White guy?” I prodded, still thinking Arbi or one of his goons.

“Nah, black dude. Big guy. Like Shaq.”

Shaquille O’Neill? “Was he coming out of your place? Did you see where he went?”

“Just about run me down. You bet I watched his ass. He was right here.” The kid pointed inside the gate. “But it’s weird, you know. He took Hy’s car. You know that bright pink thing?” He brightened. “Hey, maybe it was Hy’s brother or cousin. She’s always talking about her family back in N’Orleans. Had to be someone knew her. They had keys. ‘Sides, I mean seriously, if you was going to boost a car, would you pick that one?”

No, I wouldn’t. Never pick cars that can be seen for five city blocks was always my motto. But I knew who would.

I nodded blindly at the helpful neighbor and returned to the Beemer. I sat, pulled on my seat belt and shut the door with a soft clink before turning to Tyler.

“You find something?” he asked.

I nodded, thoughts colliding in my head. I drummed my fingers on my knee, hating what was going through my head, doing my best to deny it. She wouldn’t... Except I knew she would.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

There was wonder in my voice when I said, "She's gone back."
Tyler's face collapsed. "You're sure?"

"I am."

"She'll never get in there."

"She might, if she's not 'she.'"

"What do you mean?"

"She's out of drag. She's down there as Remy Delaflote. All six-foot-five of her." I laid my head against the back rest, wondering how it had all gone to hell so fast. "At least she's not running around in four-inch spikes. For the first time in her life, she's probably wearing sensible shoes."

CHAPTER 17

So back down to Little Armenia, the one place in the world I didn't want to be. With the one person I didn't want to be with. Well, that last wasn't exactly true. I had never felt as relaxed and plain comfortable as I felt with Tyler. Which told me that this had to end and soon. I was entering dangerous territory. Since my disastrous and ill-planned marriage to Jolene, I had never formed another attachment in my life. I was too damn old to start now.

Mariposa was a palm-lined street, crowded with mostly white, adobe, Spanish casa-style buildings, many with wrought-iron fences surrounding non-existent yards. The name on the front of the pale stucco building we eventually parked in front of was:

Mari osa Arms

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

The P was missing; the S was in danger of falling.

As darkness swallowed the daylight, street lamps came on...except for those closest to us that were burned out or broken. A single floodlight splashed the front of the Mariposa Arms, etching it in sharp shadows.

It was a two-story structure, with half a dozen covered parking spaces currently occupied by two late-model vehicles. A woman walked past the Beemer with a small, long-haired, patchy colored dog on a matching baby-blue harness and leash. She never even glanced our way. Too used to seeing strange cars parked in front of this building?

We sat in the car, studying the facade.

"Think that's it?" I asked.

"I'm wondering if we should go and look."

Was Hyacinth in there? Taz? So what did we do, start knocking on doors? Ring buzzers?

Where were Mark and Robin? When were they going to execute their no-knock warrant? I had no idea how that sort of engagement was carried out. But I didn't need to know that to realize we were going to be in everyone's way. And being in a large group of armed cops and annoying them could be a dangerous thing.

This whole affair was going to get me in a mess of trouble.

The front door opened, and two men came out. A third man hung between them. Even from where I sat, I could see the third man was barely standing.

It was Taz.

They were moving him. Had they got word of the police raid?

"Damn." I pulled out my cell and flipped it open.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“What are you doing?” Tyler hissed.

“Calling Mark. He needs to know—”

“You want to tell him we’re down here?”

I hesitated. I knew the shit would hit the fan once I made that phone call. I’d be crossing a line even Mark couldn’t ignore. And I’d be dragging Tyler with me.

I took my hand off the phone. “What do we do then?”

The two men dragged their captive to a van parked two cars down from ours. Taz was struggling. Despite what he’d been through, the guy wasn’t a quitter. I always knew he was a tough nut. One of them threw open the van door and wrestled the thrashing Taz inside. The man leapt in after Taz. The second guy slammed the panel door shut and ran around to the driver’s side. The van roared awake and screeched out onto Mariposa, swinging past us with only inches to spare.

I didn’t think. I slammed my fist into the dash. “Don’t let them get out of sight. We lose them, he’s dead.”

Obviously Tyler wasn’t thinking either. He pulled away from the curb, and we thundered after the van. The BMW rocked on its shocks and threw me against the door before I scrambled to get the seatbelt around me. Then just as abruptly, Tyler slammed on the brakes. I would have hit the dash head-on if I hadn’t just fastened the belt.

“Hey—”

A shadowy shape darted in front of the bumper to my door. A fist pounded on my window, damn near giving me a heart attack. I didn’t know the narrow black face that peered in at me. Jesus, the cops? Were they down here, after all, and now I was about to get busted for real? Shit. Shit—

“Wager! Open up, man.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Tyler was a faster thinker than I was. He popped the automatic locks, the rear door flew open and a giant threw himself into the back seat.

“What the hell are you waiting for? Go after them.”

It was Hyacinth. I twisted around in the seat and stared back at her. Or, the man I had thought of as her for as long as we’d been friends.

I was struck with her high cheekbones, lean patrician face, and the most expressive brown eyes I’ve ever seen. Right now, those eyes glared into mine. She did not look impressed.

“Took you cats took long enough to get down here. Do I gotta send you a telegram?” She waved a scented hand—I guess you could take some of the girl away, but not all of her away—and snapped, “Well, what are you waiting for? We’re going to lose them.”

As always, Tyler didn’t debate what to do. Maybe it was his military training. Jump, then think. He gunned after the van, keeping back several lengths even before Hyacinth warned him, “Don’t get too close.”

Right. Like now was the time for caution.

In answer, Tyler pointed at the glove box. “Open it, John.”

“John? He calls you John? God, he is sweet on you,” she said. “Next he’ll have some sweet little pet name for you. Sugar Buns cause you so sweet and pretty.”

I ignored her and opened the compartment. The interior light came on, and I stared at the snub-nosed gun tucked inside a brown leather holster. “How many of these things do you have? Are you some kind of gun nut?”

“I believe in my God-given right to own firearms. Says so in the Second Amendment.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“You go, girl. Tell him. Man’s got a right to protect his own.”

I kept staring at the gun. “Is that thing legal?” Of course it was. Tyler could be a Sunday school teacher he was so squeaky clean. Though I seriously doubted too many Sunday school teachers did the kinds of things we did, but that was another story. Bottom line, the guy was as straight arrow as they come.

“I have a carry permit.”

Of course you do.

“People like you were always my worst nightmare,” I muttered.

He gave me an evil grin. “Good. Make you think twice about burglarizing me.”

“Trust me, you’re off my list. Besides, your dog would probably piddle on me again, and you know where that led the first time.”

Ahead of us, the van had reached Fountain and barely slowed for the stop sign, plowing through it and heading toward Hollywood. So far, the driver had been damn lucky traffic was light. Of course it would have been too much to ask the local boys in blue to do us all a favor and pull the thing over. Then I thought of what they might have found if they had done that. You’ve heard of cops gunned down during simple traffic stops. No way I wanted to be party to something like that.

“Where are they’re taking him?” Hyacinth asked. She may have taken off the getup for the first time since I’d known her, but the patois-laden voice hadn’t changed.

“No idea,” I said. “Not anyplace nice.” Dark thoughts filled my head. “The park might be a good place to dump someone.” I refused to say body in front of his lover. Taz had been alive and kicking when he was tossed into the van. I held onto that thought.

The van kept driving north. It looked like I might be right. I

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

hate when that happens. At Los Feliz, they turned right on the red light, barely slowing down. Tires screeched and horns dopplered into silence by the time the Beemer reached the light, which was now green.

We had barely turned onto Los Feliz when the van taillights flared, and the vehicle made an abrupt left turn to Vermont Avenue, cutting off a Camry amid a flurry of outraged horns. Tyler followed. Almost immediately the neighborhood changed, grew more upscale. Gated estates and large swaths of tree-lined lawns gave way to parkland. Stately sycamores and massive Ponderosa pines competed with manicured bushes and flower beds abloom with summer flowers. The gates got higher, and the street got wider until we passed through the entrance to Griffith Park.

I don't know if Tyler was thinking of the last time we had been in the park together, but I was. Face it, Griffith Park was fast developing a very negative association for me.

"Don't lose him, sugar."

"I'm not going to," Tyler said through clenched teeth. Still, he dropped back even farther and cut his lights. Good for concealing our approach, not so good on my already overwrought nerves when I heard the wheels leave the paved road or brush the curb. There were no street lights in the park, but then, it closed at dusk. I hoped a deer didn't decide to play tag with us.

I wasn't at all familiar with this section of the grounds, but Tyler appeared to be. Maybe he brought Columbo up here for walks when he wasn't cruising Ferndell.

Hyacinth leaned over the seat between us. Her hands gripped the leather backrests, and I couldn't help but notice she had stripped off her acrylic nails. Her own nails were short and neatly trimmed on a surprisingly masculine, though fine-boned, hand.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I glanced at her face, shrouded in darkness, and was struck with what a damn good-looking man she was. Of course, she'd tell you she was a better-looking woman, but I wasn't so sure.

What she was, was my best friend, and up until then, I didn't think I'd realized that. I covered her hand with my own. "We'll get him back, sugar. Taz is going to be okay."

Her hand clenched mine in a rare show of fear, then she was back urging Tyler not to lose them, that if they got away, she'd use his balls as a pot scrubber.

Tyler slowed when the distant brake lights ahead of us flared again. He glanced at me, then back at Hy. "I think maybe it's time to call in the cavalry. You call, Hyacinth. Call John's son. Tell him you went back looking for Taz again and saw them drag him out."

"He'll be pissed," I said.

"I'm sure we can all live with it," Tyler drawled. "And you're not going to make the call. Hy is."

And she did, her voice a lot calmer than mine would have been if it were my lover out there. Hyacinth kept her cool, even when Mark started yelling at her. She calmly told him three times where we were and what the kidnappers were driving, then she disconnected her phone and grimaced.

"That is one pissed-off honky."

An apt description of my son. "Pissed off or not, is he coming?"

"He is, but he said he has to make it official this time," Hyacinth said. "Don't know what that means, but that boy always was one for coloring inside the lines. Not at all like his momma's baby daddy."

She leaned forward and stroked Tyler's neck. "So tell me, sugar. How'd you end up with my bad boy here? You must be a

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

tiger in the sheets if you caught him in your trap. My man Wager has always been slippery as a swamp eel when it comes to hanging around after the act. Like my momma used to say, not the marrying kind.”

I forcibly removed her hand from him. “*Sugar*, leave it be.”

She feigned a pout. “You say so.”

“And drop the bayou bumpkin act. It doesn’t work when you’re a broad; it doesn’t work any better now, *Remy*.”

“I think they’re pulling off the road.” Tyler ignored our banter and rolled onto the dirt shoulder. It looked like some kind of construction was going on. Saw horses, yellow construction tape and orange traffic cones blocked off some sections.

For a moment, I could no longer see taillights. Then they reappeared as the van accelerated backward across the road ahead of us. In the dim light thrown by their own lights, a thick cloud of dust enveloped them. They were moving fast. It was hard to make out what they were doing.

Then the van surged forward, tires screeching and engine redlining as it picked up speed. I saw why in about thirty seconds when it plowed into a gate that was blocking an auxiliary road probably used for maintenance. The van skidded in a donut once inside the gate and took off deeper into the park’s nether regions.

So whatever they were planning to do to Taz, they were going to do it here.

“We need to wait for Mark to bring backup—” Tyler started, but by the time he got to “backup,” he was alone in the car, and I was leaning in through the passenger’s open window.

“Come on, you don’t think she’s going to sit around waiting for anyone, do you?”

I went after Hyacinth, hoping Tyler would follow with his gun.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

If there had been streetlights, we would have been pooched. As it was, my shins took one hell of a beating as I scrambled after Hyacinth in the dim light. For a lady who wore spiked heels most of the time, she was surprisingly agile. And silent as a cat.

I didn't dare call after her to tell her to slow down. Bad enough she was charging into a mess we didn't know anything about. With Taz in danger, she wasn't thinking straight. So someone had to do her thinking for her. Not exactly my strong suit.

I caught up to her trying to scramble over a wooden fence that was more decoration than deterrence. Before she could say a word, I tackled her. I clamped my hand over her mouth and dragged her backward, where we both tumbled to the dusty ground with a smack hard enough to knock the breath out of both of us. I still managed to hiss in her ear, "For God's sake, you fool. You trying to get us all killed? You think that's going to help Taz?"

"Let me up."

"Not till you behave."

It wasn't going well for me. Six inches taller than I was, Hyacinth outweighed me by a good forty pounds. She was no lightweight in the muscle department, either. I guess keeping her girlish figure required some heavy-duty workouts. Her upper arms were like stone. She swatted me away like a pesky fly. If Tyler hadn't reached us then, I'm not sure what would have happened, but it wouldn't have been pretty.

I was thankful to see he had his gun with him. He shoved it under his belt and leaned down to help us up. He pretty much left me to tend to myself after assuring himself I hadn't busted anything, then he turned his charm on Hyacinth.

"Listen, honey. We're going to do everything we can to get to Taz, but you gotta be careful or you'll get hurt, and Taz wouldn't

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

like that, now would he?”

I crouched on her other side, rubbing my arm where her vise-like grip had almost torn it out of the socket.

“We need to have a plan, hon,” Tyler continued. “Not go charging in there and get us all killed. You agree?”

She didn’t answer at first. I could almost feel the adrenaline pumping through her; her testosterone was percolating. She was a powder keg, and somehow Tyler and I had to diffuse her and channel that energy into something that was going to make this mess better, not worse.

Finally, her eyes cleared, and her rage settled into a low-level vibration that I hoped would keep her clear-headed, but ready. For what, I had no idea.

The van had vanished through a patch of trees and dense brush. The cloud of dust lingered, marking their passage. The air smelled of bitter eucalyptus and burnt rubber.

“We have to hurry if we’re going to catch up. Come on,” Tyler said with as much urgency as I’d ever heard from him. He appeared to be enjoying this in some twisted way. Maybe it was taking him back to his military days in action.

I should have been worried.

Reluctantly, I followed the demented duo. We climbed the waist-high fence and trotted across the open dirt trail to the far side where we could hope to find some concealment in the denser growth. Deeper into the park, a coyote howled, joined almost at once by another.

In the dim light, I noticed how Tyler’s hand hovered over the butt of his gun. “You’re not going to shoot your balls off with that, are you?”

“I know how to handle a gun, John.”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Hyacinth wasn't hanging around waiting for anyone. She was off, weaving through the ghostly sycamore and California oaks. Tyler and I hurried to keep up. Now we could hear the van engine laboring. Smashing through the fence had taken its toll. I could only hope it had been a crippling one.

The trail we followed grew more crooked, becoming a rough, twisted stretch of rock and rain-carved ruts. The van wasn't four-wheel, as far as I could tell. Its route had to be tearing apart the shocks and making for one slow, torturous ride. The slow part was good. But poor Taz was going to be one bruised and battered man.

We struggled through dense brush and avoided tree limbs that threatened to poke out eyes and gouge bare skin. None of us had thought to wear jackets, what with the heat of the day. Even now, sweat rolled down my face and from under my arms, staining my T-shirt and stinging my eyes. I wiped my face, but the dust coating my short sleeve only irritated my eyes more. I breathed through my nose, stifling a sneeze now and then, almost blowing out my ear drums when I stopped one in mid blow.

"Shh!" Hyacinth snapped.

Finally, clinging to shadows, we made our way to a small clearing so far off the main road that even if someone had driven by, we wouldn't have been visible. The van panel door was open.

There was no sight of the three occupants.

CHAPTER 18

“What now?” I whispered. As though in answer, the overhead clouds broke and a full moon sent silver light shimmering through the trees. It was much easier to see, now. I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

We hugged the shadows, trying to peer through them to see where the two thugs had taken Taz. Nothing. It was like the van had always been there, abandoned, and we had just stumbled across it.

Then I heard the soft ping of the cooling engine. The sound broke the *Twilight Zone* mood. That was immediately followed by the snapping of a tree branch and a muffled curse.

Tyler signaled us to follow him. When Hyacinth made a move to go somewhere else, I grabbed her and dragged her down so her

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

ear was level with my mouth. “Let Tyler do this. The guy was a Marine. I think he may know what he’s doing.”

Hyacinth looked over at Tyler with new respect. “Marine, huh? You really did luck into it, didn’t you? Your boyfriend’s full of surprises.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

She patted my cheek. “You keep telling yourself that, sugar.” Then she was gone, after Tyler, leaving me scrambling to catch up without making a racket that would get us all killed.

Damning Marines, not-boyfriends, drag queens with suicidal tendencies and my own stupid inability to stay out of trouble, I came up on their heels so fast I nearly plowed into Hyacinth. Sweating and bleeding from too many scratches to count, I peered over their shoulders at what they saw.

The two thugs were standing in a tiny clearing surrounded by dense bush and under the overhang of several sycamores and deodar cedars. Taz was on his knees between them, hands bound behind his back. His head was bowed and silvered by moonlight. But from the set of his shoulders, I could tell that he was not defeated, even though the back of his head and one ear showed us he’d had been severely beaten. Blood smeared his torn T-shirt, and the denim jeans he wore were ripped and also covered with blood, which appeared as black shadows in the moonlight.

Beside me, Hyacinth vibrated with what I knew was renewed rage.

I put my hand on her arm, and the tension poured through me. I’d never be able to stop her if she bolted, but I had to try.

I put my lips against her ear. “Take it easy, Hy, honey. We’re here. Let’s get him out, but let’s do it safely. For all of us.”

I wasn’t sure if she heard me at first, then some of the tension

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

in her shoulders eased. I rubbed her biceps and kept whispering to her. “Good girl. Now let’s figure out what we’re going to do here.”

Distant sirens rent the night. We all froze, listening. Our disappointment was palpable when the sounds faded, disappearing into background noises. The sirens had a more profound effect on the two thugs holding Taz. Galvanized, they both grabbed Taz under his arms and hauled him half to his feet. Not bothering to make sure he was standing, they dragged him farther away from the van, toward a clump of thick shrubs. I heard the lead thug renew his cursing when his feet tangled in the plants, and he had to grab for something to keep his balance. From the sounds of it, whatever he grabbed hurt like a mother fucker.

“Shut up!” his buddy thug snapped. “We gotta get him out of plain sight. I don’t want nobody to find this asshole for a long time. Maybe the animals will get him before the cops find him. Either way, we’ll be long gone. Come on, suck it up.”

Thug One swore some more, but he renewed his grip on Taz, and together they dragged the struggling man into the bushes. It was clear Taz was getting weaker. I doubted he had much more fight in him. Once they got him under the cover of those bushes, they wouldn’t need him to be mobile and could finish the job.

When I saw one of them pull out a gun very much like the one Tyler had first pulled on me, I knew it was now or never. Behind us, a new round of sirens grew audible, ululating and screaming. But we couldn’t wait to see if they were coming to us.

Suddenly, I wished Tyler had brought more guns along with him. This was going to get messy.

Tyler was all business now. He leaned over and whispered, “I want you to try to find something you can use as a weapon. A tree branch, big rock. Think you can do that?”

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

I nodded, and he touched my shoulder and smiled tiredly. “Good. We’ll get out of this, John. I swear.”

If I hadn’t known that he was a Marine, I would have now. Using hand signals, he gestured for me to go right, behind the clearing, telling me to keep a low profile. I obeyed and got down on my stomach, crab crawling across the uneven ground toward the sounds of Taz’s heavy breathing and grunts of pain that now shared the night with distant sirens and the fainter noises of crickets and other night things. Dust and pollen coated my nose and throat, and my breathing grew labored. While I crawled, I kept an eye out for something solid enough to hit somebody with.

I hoped Tyler had Hy under control, and she wouldn’t go off the deep end trying to rescue Taz. I knew the only chance any of us had was the element of surprise. The two thugs were too busy subduing Taz and getting him into the bushes to pay attention to their surroundings. Clearly, they had no idea anyone might have followed them.

It was about our only advantage.

CHAPTER 19

The sirens were getting closer now. Close enough to alarm our two armed thugs. One of them shoved away both Taz and his partner and brought up his gun. Now or never. My fingers closed over a broken branch on the ground under my face. It wasn't very big, but it was all I had. I threw myself into a half crouch and heaved it at the trio.

My aim sucked. The branch struck a tree trunk and splintered into wood chips.

But it had the desired effect of distracting the armed man. He moved toward the sound, his gun jerking in search of the source. I froze, holding my breath, stifling the tickle in my throat. Another sound came from the other side of the clearing. Hy or Tyler were in play, trying to confuse the two thugs as to how many assailants

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

were hiding in the dark. It seemed to have the desired effect of throwing the bad guys off balance. The man holding Taz, let him go and fumbled to pull out his own weapon.

“Get out of here,” the first thug said.

“Take care of him first. Arbi will kill us if we don’t.”

But when Thug One brought his gun around again, Tyler fired. The shot pinged off a tree with a loud crack. Thug One ducked and looked around wildly, unsure where the threat was coming from, growing more confused by the second. A second shot followed, and the guy nearest Taz cried out and went down.

That made it easy for the first thug to throw in the towel. He ducked and ran. Tyler fired two more times and missed, but succeeded in driving the greatest threat to Taz away from him.

Before anyone else could regroup and make a new assault, Hyacinth bolted from her cover and threw herself on Taz. Tyler and I raced after her. Tyler quickly disarmed the bleeding man, who was moaning and clutching his gut. I looked around in a panic for the other guy. One look told me the van was still there, so where was he? On foot running?

“Help me get Taz out of here,” Hyacinth yelled. Tyler grabbed him by one arm and Hyacinth the other, and I led the way, clearing the prickly undergrowth as best I could. I was glad to see Tyler had put his weapon back under his belt, the handle jutting out for easy reach.

We got Taz onto relatively flat ground and laid him out. Hyacinth sank onto her knees beside him, fussing over him, wiping blood off his bruised face, while Tyler tried to determine just how bad his injuries were.

He met my gaze over Hyacinth’s head. “I think he’s okay.”

The sirens were joined by the overhead thump, thump of an

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

LAPD helicopter. Its spotlight illuminated the van, then found us. Tyler waved and pointed to the injured Taz at his feet.

The helicopter kept circling, and soon a pair of black and whites roared down the road, spinning through the busted gate and slamming to a stop on either side of the van. Four uniformed cops emerged, guns drawn. They immediately spotted Tyler and his gun.

“Hands on top of your head,” the older one shouted. “Do it. All of you!”

I complied. I knew the drill. Tyler didn’t. He took a step forward, and I could see he was going to tell them something stupid like he had a permit. But I couldn’t reach for him or tell him to do as he was told. At his first step forward, all four cops had their weapons trained on him, and the spotlight from the helicopter moved from the van to Tyler, who finally froze, looking alarmed. Facing down four armed LAPD officers can do that to you.

Seconds seemed to stretch into hours. My arms began to ache from holding them aloft. I had frozen in an awkward half crouch and my back was threatening to spasm on me. A cold, clammy sweat dripped down my pits and chest. I could smell my own fear. I risked a quick sideways glance at Tyler. He was pale but calm. His hands were now on top of his head, and he didn’t look at anyone but the officers in front of him.

It quickly became clear they thought one of us had beaten Taz. They had made Hyacinth stand and put her hands atop her head. She was staring down all four officers, and when Hyacinth stares you down, it’s an awesome sight. She can look down her nose at just about anyone. But she was wasting her efforts on these guys. I knew attempts to explain anything would be ignored until they got us out of there and back to Northeast.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Anybody else armed?” the officer I assumed was in charge, asked.

We all murmured no.

“So if I pat you down I’m not going to find anything on you? No sharps, no drugs, nothing?”

I thought frantically, and my heart sank. No weapons or drugs, but I was still carrying my lock picks and car jacking tools. That, plus the record they were going to find when they ran my ID, was not going to sit well with these guys. A criminal in hand was worth more to the LAPD than one, literally, in the bush.

They approached Tyler first, since he was the only visibly armed man. With caution, they wrenched the gun off him and slapped cuffs on him. More cars arrived. An unmarked, probably a detective or supervisor, and a pair of ambulances.

I stared at the ground, knowing it was only a matter of minutes before I was cuffed and stuffed in the back of a patrol car. This day couldn’t get any worse.

Then it did. A pair of black military boots appeared in front of me. A hand took hold of my arm and pulled me forward. Then a voice, “I need to talk to this man.”

It was Mark. I looked up and found his grim face staring down at me. My son was not pleased. Well, join my ever-growing fan club.

The supervisor approached Mark, and they conferred in whispers. Finally, the LAPD officer stepped back and let Mark pull me out of the circle. He led me over to his unmarked. No sign of Preacher or Robin.

“You want to tell me what you’re doing here? No — on second thought, don’t bother. I’m sure none of it will make any sense, and it will only make my headache worse. Who did this? Was that guy

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

who was shot alone?”

“No, there’s another one. He got away. But the blue tornados back there wouldn’t let us talk, so he’s probably long gone by now. What’s going to happen to us?”

“You get taken to Northeast. They may or may not book you. I guess that depends... You got anything on you that’s going to cause a problem?”

I hated it, but I had to tell him about the tools I was carrying.

“Where are they?”

When I told him, he put himself between me and the others, and fished around in my pocket until he found them. He slipped them into his own pocket.

“Don’t think you’re getting them back, either.”

I prudently kept my mouth shut.

“Okay, let’s go back. I’ll try to get things sorted out for you once you’re at Northeast, but I can’t promise you won’t get held overnight and—”

I saw the movement out of the corner of my eye, and without thinking, I yelled and flung myself against Mark. A loud crack followed, and something slammed into my shoulder sending me tumbling on top of Mark, who was yelling and thrashing to throw me off.

After that, things went to hell.

Voices loud and authoritative, shouting out commands and filling the air with their bluster rolled over me. That was odd, I was lying on the ground. I don’t remember the cops proning me out. Someone must have though. I tested my arms and was surprised to find I wasn’t wearing handcuffs. I pressed my cheek against the ground and felt something in my mouth. A quick examination with my tongue revealed that I had dirt in my teeth. Okay, I’ve done a

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

lot of weird things in my life, but I've never eaten dirt. I tried to spit it out, but had no saliva. I also found I couldn't move when I tried to turn my head off the ground.

Okay, this was getting scary now. Where was I? The last thing I remember was lunging at Mark—Mark! Where the hell was he? I tried to call him, but as well as not being able to move, I couldn't talk either.

Before panic could set in, surprisingly gentle hands took hold of me and lifted me up. Indescribable pain shot through my back and all the way down to my toes. I think I groaned. Maybe I just imagined it. Everything went gray then.

The next time my vision cleared, I was lying on my back on something a lot more comfortable than the ground. Faces peered down at me and bright lights behind them threw them into silhouette. I didn't see anyone I knew. Then Mark was there, and I felt a measure of calmness flow through me. For some reason, I had thought something bad had happened to him.

I tried to ask him what the hell was going on, but he wasn't listening. Instead, he was bending over me, holding my hand.

Holding my hand? Mark?

Then he looked up and met my gaze, and I totally lost it. He was crying.

So, something was very wrong here. Mark wouldn't cry unless something happened to his mother. Was Jolene hurt? Is that what this was about? But how did Jolene get up to Griffith Park?

It took me a few more hours—probably minutes, really—before I realized I was in an ambulance, and we were racing through the streets. Lights flashed by at a phenomenal speed, and sirens pulsed through the air all around me.

Finally, I gave it up and closed my eyes. Maybe it would make

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

more sense after I slept for a while. Memories of pain. Then memories of darkness, then there was nothing. The place I went to was the softest, nicest place I've ever been.

I was reluctant to leave it the next time someone tried to wake me up.

I batted at the hand that touched my forehead, but that didn't get anywhere. My arms weren't working. Neither, it seemed, was anything else. I tried to open my eyes and found them sealed shut. That was when panic settled in. Shit, I was blind and paralyzed. What the hell had happened? Why couldn't I remember anything—

A soft, warm cloth touched my face, the dampness soothing on my forehead. A low voice spoke to me. "Settle down, John. You're going to be okay. You're in the hospital. Let me just wipe your face. Your eyes are kind of stuck together with gunk."

When I could finally get my eyes open, I found myself looking into Tyler's gentle face. "Ah, hi," I said, confused. "Where am I?"

"USC General. You were brought in to emergency yesterday."

"Yester—" I tried to sit up and found I couldn't. "What happened? Why am I here?"

"It's okay, John. You're okay. They just have an IV in you, and they secured your arms so you wouldn't knock it out in your sleep."

I stopped pulling and stared at him. "What happened? Tell me."

He glanced behind him. "I think I'll let someone else talk to you about that."

Before I could protest, he stepped away and another figure took his place. Markie. I mean Mark. "Ah..."

"Speechless. I kind of like it. You want to know what happened?"

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

“Yes.”

“How much do you remember?”

“All of it—” Then I thought hard. What did I remember? Hyacinth and Taz, an explosion in Venice Beach, Jesus—Bunny! Other things in flashes and disjointed visions of brightness and darkness. “I was in the park with Hyacinth and Tyler. We were chasing someone and they had Taz—Taz, how is he? Is he okay?” Again I tried to sit up, sure he was going to tell me Taz had died despite all our efforts to save him.

“Hold on, Dad. Taz is fine. He’s here, just down the hall. You can probably go see him before you get discharged.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“What else do you remember?”

I shrugged. “The cops were there—LAPD I guess. They thought we were the suspects and they handcuffed Tyler.” I looked around for Tyler, to make sure he was all right. He was standing over by the door smiling at me. I relaxed. “Then they were going to come for me, that’s when you showed up, and I don’t remember much after that.”

“Not surprising I guess, after that kind of trauma,” Mark said.

“What kind of trauma? What aren’t you telling me? Come on, Mark, stop fucking around.”

“You were shot in the back.” Mark looked pained. “You stepped in front of a bullet meant for me.”

“I did?”

I looked over at new motion by the door. It was busy in here. Expecting a doctor in a lab coat, I was startled to find a well-dressed man with an unctuous grin approaching the bed, hand outstretched. I shook it as best I could, considering my arms were restrained. His hands were powder dry, his nails clearly manicured.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Soft hands, a desk jockey's hands.

"Mr. Wager," he said. "I'm Don Gallagher from Morely, Dunnham and Gallagher."

"Are you my doctor?"

"No, sir, not your doctor. I'm an attorney who's been retained to represent you."

"Represent me in what?"

Gallagher looked from Mark to Tyler. "He hasn't been told yet?"

"I was getting to it," Mark said, clearly not happy this guy was here. But then, Mark never had much good to say about lawyers on the general principal that they were related to garden slugs, only the slugs were more highly evolved. Still, that didn't explain why this particular garden slug was here telling me I was his client.

"Well somebody explain it to me."

"Don't expect me to tell him. I think it's ridiculous that they'd even consider this, let alone go through with it. After what he's been through." This outburst from Tyler. I don't think I've ever seen him so upset, not even when he was staring down the barrel of a gun at me. Twice.

"Okay, now someone really has to tell me."

"I agree with your boyfriend on this, but my hands are tied." Mark made a face. "You are being charged with fleeing the scene of a crime, malicious mischief, failing to remain at the scene and resisting arrest. Someone from the sheriff's office will be by tomorrow when you're discharged to formally read the charges."

"Arrested?" Finally, after all the last week had brought, and I thought the worst was over, and *now* they were going to toss me in jail? Tell me, was that irony or just plain bad luck? I looked up at the lawyer. "And what are you here for—to take a statement from

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

me?”

“No, I’m here to defend you against these ridiculous charges.”

“Well at least we’re agreed on one thing.” I eyed his expensive suit, manicured fingernails and what my practiced eye knew was at least a two-carat, white-gold, princess-cut, diamond pinky ring worth at least four grand. No way this guy was a public defender. “I think you might be in the wrong place. You’re mistaking me for someone with money.”

“My services are already secured,” Gallagher said, glancing from Tyler to Mark.

“I recommended Mr. Gallagher,” Mark said sourly. “Tyler asked me who was good, and all I know is when this guy shows up in court representing someone, it makes cops get sphincter shock. They call him Ball-Breaker down in the courthouse. Tyler wanted the best. He’s supposed to be the best.”

“I’m not going to let them railroad you with any third-strike garbage,” Tyler said. “Not after what you went through.”

I stared across the room at Tyler, wanting to tell him this wasn’t a good idea. In fact, it was a terrible idea. Did he think it was going to make a connection between us? That we were going to bond over our shared misfortune? I had already made up my mind to leave before this whole stinking thing with Taz had started.

I wasn’t going to waver from that resolve.

Not for anyone.

Not even for him.

Tyler came over to the bed and picked up the hand that didn’t have anything attached to it. He squeezed it, then raised it to his mouth. His lips were dry and his beard rasped. Hadn’t the guy gone home to shave? “I’ll be back later. You rest, Sugar Buns.

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

Hyacinth is going to stop by later to say hi. Make sure you drop in on Taz before you leave.” He glared at Mark. “You escort him if you have to. But he sees Taz, got it?”

“I’ll see he gets there.”

“Good. I brought you some clothes for when you’re discharged.” Tyler pulled several items out of an Abercrombie & Fitch bag. Jeans, T-shirt, a denim jacket...

The last thing out of the bag was a pair of sky-blue pajamas. I stared at everything he handed me and muttered a hoarse thank you.

He nodded. Then he was gone, and I felt his absence.

Did he really just call me Sugar Buns?

Gallagher took his leave then, also, promising to be back in the morning before the sheriff’s deputies arrived.

Then it was just Mark and me. We stared at each other across a chasm larger than any hospital room. Larger than the whole city of L.A.

“Listen I—” We both start talking at once. I stopped first and fell into an uneasy silence. What do you say to someone who’s seen you as a fuck-up all his life? And he’s been right? You can’t apologize for it, there isn’t enough time or words in the world. So instead of trying, I shrugged and said, “I’m sorry.” And shut up.

He shook his head and grimaced. “Me, too. I tried to talk them out of it. But they insisted. You have to be charged with something. Too many things fucked up. Too many people saw you linked to all that violence. Someone has to be scapegoated.”

“What better choice,” I said, and even half believed it.

“Well, yeah. They got the two kidnappers, but so far they aren’t rolling over on Arbi. But most of the heat’s going to go on them either way. That’s LAPD’s problem. But Gallagher is pretty sure

MEMORY OF DARKNESS

he can get you off for time served, so all you have to do is hang tight until the sentencing and you'll be out. Six... ten weeks."

"Piece of cake."

"I'll come by with Robin. For some odd reason, she seems to like you. I know Hyacinth and Taz will visit. And I'm sure your boyfriend will come around to see you, too. Probably every day. He hasn't left your side since yesterday."

"He's not—" I stopped, feeling a big, dopey smile on my lips that was only partly from the drugs they gave me. "Yeah, maybe he will."

Sugar Buns, huh? We were going to have to talk about that.

P. A. BROWN

At 22 years of age, P. A. Brown's life changed forever when she sold everything she owned and moved 2,000 miles away to a city she'd never visited, where she knew no one. Coming from a sheltered life, she spent the next eight years doing her own wild and crazy thing. She roamed the good and bad streets of Los Angeles, doing things that in retrospect were probably downright idiotic. Knowing nothing about the city (or any big city) she made the brilliant decision to get a cheap apartment. She found one, in the heart of a crime-ridden section of Hollywood, one she later found out was called a war zone by the LAPD. There were stabbings and shootings and assaults every weekend. Thus was her introduction to life in a big American city.

Most of her time in L. A. was spent in the underbelly of the city, including a month or so living out of a car. She visited Skid Row, spent time on the streets of Hollywood, and befriended a bartender who was killed after she went home with a customer. And you wonder why she writes crime novels? During the 80s, P. A. saw the advent of a terrible disease no one understood that became known as AIDS. Being immersed in the gay community, P. A. knew a lot of people who died in those days. For a brief period, she was even a "Valley Girl," living within spitting distance of the famous Sherman Oaks Galleria. Does she miss it? Every minute of every day.

For more information on P. A. Brown, please visit her website at:

www.pabrown.ca

**Don't miss *The Bear*, by P. A. Brown,
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Scott Thompson discovers a dead bear, killed by poachers in the parkland he calls home. He is charged with investigating this tragedy and trying to bring the poachers to justice. Then a second bear shows up. Or so he thinks. But when Scott calls in his boss, Luke Stadler, to assist him, the “bear” turns out to be a naked man, seeking shelter in Scott’s barn, shot in the leg and seriously injured.

Luke and Scott tend the wounded man during a raging blizzard that traps all three of them in Scott’s isolated cabin in the mountain forest. During their forced confinement, Scott and Luke succumb to their attraction and unleash a passion that burns hot and bright.

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