

BLIND BELIEF

by

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MEMENTO MORI MYSTERIES

CHAPTER ONE

October 10

Day One

I never imagined in my lifetime—as long as I stayed put in the west—that a warning such as this one would ever involve me: *The National Weather Service has just issued a hurricane watch for Southern California.*

The last hurricane to blow through here, the bartender went on to inform us, was back in 1939, over sixty years ago. It had sunk boats, destroyed homes, killed dozens of people, and triggered catastrophic flooding. As the clock chimed 2 a.m., the bartender then announced that the 21 Oceanfront bar was closing, adding as he escorted us out of the restaurant that forecasters were predicting that a storm similar to the storm of '39 was on its way here now.

I had been out with Lieutenant Blaine Stedman and his childhood buddy, Adam Cirillo, celebrating Adam's birthday. Apparently the two of them have a long-standing tradition of meeting on Cirillo's birthday at the hour he was born—midnight.

We step out onto the beach parking lot. It is totally deserted except for a few cars and the hundreds of parking

meters standing guard over their assigned precious space between two white lines.

Adam Cirillo pulls his car keys from his jean's pocket and says, "Don't let this big-spender fool you, Katlin." Adam throws an arm around Blaine's shoulder. "Behind Stedman Yachts, behind all his millions, behind this blue-eyed, Mr. Reserve Lieutenant, he's got a little birthday tradition of his own." Adam gives me a look no girl could misinterpret. Based on this same look he's been giving me all evening, it seems to me that this guy is all about sex. And he has the sex appeal of a Pierce Brosnan, which makes him difficult to resist. While I've only just met him for the first time tonight, he seems the type who is so wired on just keeping himself under control that the rest of the world is sort of an after-thought.

Blaine knuckles through Adam's head of semi-wet, brown hair, the blond streaks in it glistening under the streetlight. "I know where you're going with this, Cir. Don't."

"I might have to have a beer or two on every birthday-midnight, but this guy's mother used to take her sweet baby boy to the seashore on his birthday, used to bundle him up in his sleeping bag and sing happy birthday to him as the waves rolled in."

Blaine loosens his tie, seemingly a little unnerved.

I say, "I think that's one of the most endearing things I've ever heard." I didn't have a special bond like that with either of my parents. This new piece of information about a guy that I've only known a month touches me.

Before Blaine can respond, Adam tells us that he has to run and he takes off. Blaine shakes his head from side to side. I wonder if he noticed at all that his best friend was flirting with me? I'm about to ask him when he asks, "How 'bout a quick walk on the beach?"

"Love it." I'm not ready to go home yet. I'm a probation

officer on the Gang Violence Suppression Unit in Santa Ana. An early morning walk in the sand would be a nice break from my probationers and their harsh Santa Ana realities. I'm not complaining, mind you. I love my job. After all, I grew up in a gang. It was comprised of my three older brothers, three younger sisters, a baby brother and me. My gang of siblings survived much the same way any gang does: by staying together—at all costs—through turbulent times.

But besides any of this, time alone with Blaine will give me a chance to ask him exactly what he thinks about his buddy, Adam Cirillo.

As we walk across the parking lot toward the beach, I notice that it is unseasonably warm, I'd guess in the low seventies, where normally it would be a lot colder this time of year. A tropical breeze blows off the water, rustles the tops of the palm trees. It is absolutely heavenly and yet so foreign that you can't help but question its hypnotic advances toward you; its huge ability to weaken you before the killer winds strike.

"Help! Somebody please help me!" A young man runs out from the darkness of The Newport Dory Fishing Fleet, hysterical.

We run over to him. His hands are covered in blood. "Over here. Hurry!"

The boy leads us down a wooden walkway, in between dory boats to our right and left. At the end of the pathway, he stops and points a bloody finger inside one of the dories. "Please do something."

At first, I can't make out what it is, only that it lays still, its breathing shallow and labored. Could it be a dying yellowtail? Naturally, a dying fish is my first guess as this whole area turns into an open-air fish market in just a few hours. Customers will come from all over to buy fresh fish out of these boats.

My only light source is a single bulb hanging over a workbench on the other side of the dory. I have to wait a second for my eyes to adjust. I lean closer into the dory and a bloody hand grabs hold of my collar and pulls me deeper into the boat. Icy lips press against my ear.

"Todopoderoso."

The voice is faint, as if speaking to me from a place halfway between here and heaven. I have heard it someplace before but the scent of death precludes remembering.

I take the hand from my collar and hold it tight. "You hang on," I whisper to this strangely familiar body. My eyes adjust now. I wish they had not: the hand I hold belongs to Maria Esparza, the mother of one of my probationers. Her face is shock-pale and her eyes are dilated. She stares blankly past me as if she has no idea what's going on or what has happened to her. "You hang with me, Maria. You hear me?"

"Call 911, Blaine."

"I just hung up with them. They're on their way."

Maria's clothes are soaked in blood. I lean further into the boat to see if I can determine the source of her blood loss. I notice a small puncture wound on the side of her neck. Blood trails from it, fatigued. I grab a towel off of one of the workbenches and press it against Maria's wound. "You stay here with me. Understand?" Maria doesn't. Instead, she quits breathing and I, honest to God, feel her soul hover above us.

As paramedic sirens scream closer, Blaine asks, "What else can I do, Katlin?"

"Pray."