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BURNING MAN

ALAN RUSSELL



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ALAN RUSSELL**

f THOMAS & MERCER

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*To Cynthia,
Who never gives up.*

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ALSO BY ALAN RUSSELL
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PROLOGUE:

HELLFIRE AND DOGS OF WAR

Even before I pressed down hard on the gas, Sirius was aware that something was up. The dog knew me better than I knew myself. The dividing window between us was open, and he pushed me with his muzzle. Sometimes he begs treats off me that way, but he wasn't looking for a handout this time.

"Whaduya want?" I asked in a Brooklyn accent three thousand miles removed from my own.

He rested his muzzle on my shoulder and I felt his hot breath on my neck. "Doggy breath," I told him, but he wasn't shamed at all.

"All right," I said. "It could be a big call, a *really* big call. This might be your chance to make Rin Tin Tin look like a pussy."

I moved my head to get a look at him, and he took that as an invitation to give me a lick.

"Cops don't kiss other cops," I told him, wiping away his slobber.

His eyes were sparkling. That's what Jenny noticed when I first brought him home. "Look at his sparkling eyes," she said. "They look like little stars."

"Twinkle, twinkle," I had said to her.

"What's his name?" she asked.

The dog had kept his reserve with me for most of our first day together, but from the moment he and Jenny met they acted as if they were twins separated at birth.

"His name is Serle," I said, curling my lip and using my most authoritarian German accent.

"What's that mean?"

"Armed," I said, "as in armed and dangerous."

The way he was already cuddled up in Jenny's arms didn't make him look very dangerous. "That won't do," she said. "His name is Sirius."

"You can't be *serious*?"

Jenny ignored me. The dog's ears had perked up when she dubbed him Sirius, no doubt because it sounded like Serle. "Just look at your sparkling eyes, Sirius," Jenny had said.

She named him after the Dog Star, the brightest star in the night sky. It wasn't a

name exactly in keeping with LA's furry finest. His peers had names like Duke, Jake, Rico, Bravo, Tango, and, of course, Joe Friday.

The dog nudged me again. The traffic was beginning to slow us down and Sirius was anticipating my next move. "All right," I said and flipped on the siren. Sirius added to the sound effects with a few high notes of his own. One of the occupational hazards of being a K-9 cop is loss of hearing because of your partner's barking and howling.

I probably should have given him the German command of *Nein* or *Pfui*, but instead I said, "Shut up, Elvis." Sirius had been born and raised in Germany, but three years in California had him well on his way to becoming a surfer dude. He knew my slang well enough and stopped his howling.

The siren had its Moses-like parting effect, and once we were able to navigate through the blockage of traffic I flipped off the horn. Most of LA's K-9 units work out of Metropolitan Division, which means on any given shift we can be called out to handle situations over an area of 470 square miles. No one puts more miles on its cars than a K-9 unit does. When the call had come in, we were dispatched because we were the closest to Benedict Canyon.

The city of Los Angeles is rife with canyons, with neighborhoods built up and around them. Benedict Canyon is an affluent area, and its residents usually feel far removed from urban LA. The ravine starts in the Hollywood Hills and drops down in a north-to-south direction, ending in Beverly Hills. Even small homes in the BC area usually command seven figures. Residents are enthusiastic about their special enclave, but occasionally snakes slither into paradise. Decades earlier, the Manson Family visited a house in Benedict Canyon on a fateful August night and when they left, five people were dead, including the actress Sharon Tate, who was eight months pregnant.

As if on cue to that bad history, the wind began to whistle and wail. To my right I caught a glimpse of a huge shadow moving past a streetlamp, and turned to see a body-sized palm frond drop from the sky. As the branch struck the street, I could hear its impact even through the squad car's closed windows. The Santa Ana winds were blowing again, and it was a good thing LA was living up to its stereotype of not being a pedestrian town. No one was out walking, and those in their cars looked as if they just wanted to get home safe and sound. It was on nights like this that it was easy to imagine being back in the Old West. LA is the largest city in the country, but during Santa Ana conditions dust devils do their spinning, and tumbleweed can often be seen rolling on its streets. I had seen neither tumbleweed nor devils yet, but the night was young.

In that morning's *LA Times* there had been an article on the Santa Ana winds, which had been blowing for much of the week. The article had quoted from Raymond Chandler's story "Red Wind," describing those hot "winds that curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch." Chandler had said that when the Santa Ana winds blew through, anything can happen.

My partner was ready; he wagged his tail.

It was too dark to see much of the dusty movement of the hot air being funneled down through the canyons, but I could feel its surge. Every so often my squad car rocked back and forth as if it was being shaken by the draft of some big rig. The blow was pushing everything in its path, an unseen big, bad wolf huffing and puffing. Down

the street I could see traffic lights throwing their colors around. It was like looking at the light show of a kaleidoscopic lighthouse. Nobody I knew liked Santa Anas—except for the serial murderer the media called the Santa Ana Strangler.

The Santa Ana winds blow hardest between November and March, and over the last two windy seasons the Strangler had strangled eleven women, each taken during a Santa Ana condition. Some of the tabloids were calling his murders “Gone with the Wind.” Only minutes earlier there had been a hot call. A woman in Benedict Canyon had fought off an attack by a masked man with a garrote. Neighbors had heard her screams, and their pounding at the door had driven off the woman’s assailant. Her attacker had been spotted fleeing into the darkness of the canyon.

In the distance a fire truck’s siren called out, and then a few moments later another joined in, and then there came the sounds of a third. Sirius’s ears were up and at the ready. I could tell he was considering joining the chorus, so I said, “Don’t even think about it.”

One of his two ears wilted.

I lowered the window and sniffed. A hairy muzzle joined me in that pursuit. Somewhere not too far away a fire was burning. Santa Ana winds and fire are a fearsome combination. As a patrolman, I had worked evacuations of neighborhoods during a few bad burns and been a reluctant witness to the winds whipping up the fires. It wasn’t a detail I had ever liked. Up close you could see why Santa Anas are called the “devil winds.” The Spanish word for Satan is *Satanás*; some believe “Santa Ana” is just the anglicized *Satanás*. The hot winds don’t come from the desert, it is whispered, but from hell.

Sirius offered a throaty growl to all the unseen demons. If the demons had any sense, they fled the scene. Jenny had always been convinced the dog was privy to a world lost on us poor humans, and not just because some of his senses are so much more keen than those of any of us *Homo sapiens*. Jen and I used to laugh when Sirius tilted his head and cocked his ears, as if listening to a voice. Sometimes he’d even carry on conversations with that voice, making pleased and excited sounds. “Sirius is talking to God,” Jenny would say; her tone was always playful, but I could never tell if she was kidding or not. Jenny thought Sirius was special.

The sirens were all converging on one spot: the same place where I was going. I was waved through several checkpoints; a cordon had been set up around the area. Even from two blocks away the smoke was bad, and where I was going it was worse. As I turned a corner I saw a house in flames.

Firefighters were running around, positioning their hoses. Winds were driving the flames high into the air, pushing the fire perilously close to neighboring houses. Fire trucks took up most of the street, and their played-out hoses made for hard speed bumps. An orange glow covered the area, and the shooting flames looked contagious enough to make me position my squad car for a quick getaway. Maglite in hand, I ran forward, scanning house numbers. Sirius stayed closer to my side than my own shadow.

There was shouting all around us. Some of the residents were grabbing hoses and filling buckets of water, ready to make a stand, while others were scrambling for prized possessions and in the process of evacuating. Everyone was looking for guidance, even the cops on the scene. Officers were being besieged for answers they

didn't have. The night showed a lot of white eyeballs. Fire gets everyone's attention like nothing else.

Only one house on the street was on fire—so far. It was torching up like a bonfire, the flames licking high above the roof. The attack on the woman had taken place a few doors down from the house on fire, so I hurried past it. Squad cars and unmarked sedans were parked in front of the house I was looking for, and two officers were posted on the walkway outside. Their attention was more on the nearby fire than guard duty, but at our approach both of the uniforms stopped their eyeballing of the flames. One of them pointed to the front door and said, "The detectives are waiting for you inside."

As we passed by, both men inched away from Sirius, allowing us a wide berth. Fellow officer or not, my partner was a close relative of the wolf, and he did have big, bad teeth.

At the entryway I told Sirius, "Setz!" His body language showed me his unhappiness with the command. Every week, handlers practiced exercises called long sits and long downs, training designed to try our charge's patience. It was the dog's job to assume the designated position and wait for hours if necessary. Sirius would stay put even if he didn't like it. Inside, I could see that evidence techs were already working the scene, and from past experience I knew they preferred dog hair to not be a part of their trace evidence.

"*Bleib!*" I told Sirius, the German command to stay. He deflated and made a sound somewhere between an exasperated sigh and a moan that voiced doubts about my decision-making ability. The sound was familiar to me. I was known to make similar noises when given orders by superiors that didn't know their asses from a hole in the ground. I liked to think I could make that distinction. My partner's eyes tracked me, hoping for a reprieve, until I disappeared inside.

Crime scenes are normally handled in very deliberate fashion, but the nearby flames had everybody jumping. Two detectives from Homicide Special, along with a crime scene unit, were working the family room. Anything that might have a connection to the Santa Ana Strangler had the highest priority in town.

One of the suits recognized me and came over. I seemed to remember his last name was the same as some Ivy League school. Brown, I thought, or Yale.

"Cornell," he said.

On a multiple-choice test I would have gotten it. "Gideon," I said.

As he wrote down my name, Cornell said, "Where's the mutt?"

At another time I might have told him it wasn't my responsibility to know where his wife was, but not now. The room was already tense enough.

"Front door," I said.

He gave a quick, preoccupied nod. "We've gathered some clothing and other items the suspect came in contact with. We want your dog to get a nose full of eau de bad guy and see if he can pick up on his scent. We're pretty sure he's still in the canyon. The SOB must have known we'd try to seal off the area. I'll bet you dollars to cents he snuck out of the brush and set that house fire as a diversion."

The family room had a view out to the canyon, but at night it was like looking at a sea of black. The nearby fire hinted at the expanse of foliage in the ravine, but the light from the flames didn't penetrate far into the brush. A sudden flare of light in the

darkness caught my eye; moments later there was a torching of undergrowth and shrubbery.

“I’ll pass on that bet,” I said. “Apparently one diversion wasn’t enough.”

Cornell turned to see what I was pointing at and then cursed. We watched the wind begin to whip up the flames. Both of us knew we were looking at a tinderbox. Under these conditions it was likely that dozens of homes would soon be in jeopardy.

“He must have brought some kind of accelerant with him,” I said.

In a wishful voice Cornell said, “Maybe, if we’re lucky, he’ll burn up in his own hell.”

From what I knew of the Santa Ana Strangler, his crime scenes were very organized. If this was the Strangler, he would have planned for an escape route even under extreme conditions.

“He would have expected a call to go out for dog teams,” I said. “He set the fire to discourage pursuit and eliminate the possibility of being tracked.”

“That’s probably not the only escape plan in his bag of tricks,” Cornell said. “At one of his other crime scenes a fire was also set and a witness described a fireman that was never accounted for.”

It would be easy for a sooty firefighter to make his escape with all the chaos going on. Only seconds had passed since the canyon fire had been lit, but I could already see the orange glow spreading. The tracking conditions were already poor and would only get worse.

LA’s K-9 units have weekly field exercises where officers take turns wearing padded bite suits and acting out the role of bad guy. Whenever the chief trainer for Metropolitan Division puts on his bite suit and calls for a dog to be unleashed, he always shouts one particular line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

I voiced the same line: “Cry ‘Havoc!’” I said, “And let slip the dogs of war.”

Cornell gave me a look. “Huh?”

“If my partner is going to have any chance of picking up the scent, we have to act now.”

Sirius was on a thirty-foot lead. His nose was to the ground and his body language told me that he had the scent. Handlers like to describe the way a dog tracks in missile terms: Sirius had the target on his radar. Whether he’d be able to close on that target and stay on the scent was another matter. The air was smoky. A wet cloth covered my face, but Sirius didn’t have that luxury. He needed his nose fully functional, which meant he’d have to endure the smoky conditions without any buffers.

We entered the brush, following a trail into the canyon. The fire was about a hundred yards away, but it felt closer than that. The swirling winds were hotter now. I could hear the hunger of the fire as it feasted on the undergrowth. The snapping and crackling of the dry chaparral, and the gusting of the wind, filled the natural amphitheater with whistling and howling. Anyone sensible would have retreated from the chorus of hell. It’s not natural to walk toward fire, but that was where my partner was leading me, and he was doing that because I asked it of him.

The fire was unchecked; firefighters weren’t yet ready to take on the canyon’s blaze. With every step I remembered why I had never wanted to be a fireman. My wet mask wasn’t stopping my throat and nose from hurting, and the smoke was making my

eyes tear. Most of the time I walked with my eyes shut, trusting to the senses of my partner. I was used to playing blindman's bluff with Sirius. Part of our K-9 exercises involved blindfolding handlers and then ordering our dogs to track. The training gave the dog the confidence to lead and the handler to follow. We were a team forged over thousands of hours of working together, and the death of the woman we both loved.

I made encouraging sounds. Sirius was no bloodhound, but his sense of smell was still about a million times better than mine. LA police dogs do a lot of cross-training, and tracking was a frequent exercise.

"*Such!*" I encouraged, using the German pronunciation, *tsuuk*, and telling Sirius to track or find, but even more often than that I said "Good dog" or the German words of praise "*So ist brav.*"

In stops and starts, we continued into the canyon, the elusive scent drawing us forward. We traveled on anything but a straight line. Sirius tugged me one way and then the other. Most of the time his nose was to the ground, but sometimes he raised it up and sniffed the breeze, doing his best to pick up the scent over the smoke that filled the air. He seemed oblivious of the nearby fire; I was anything but.

We navigated our way through patches of laurel sumac, lemonade berry, and sagebrush. With the Maglite I tried to sweep the area to avoid yucca and patches of cactus and jumping cholla. Sirius forged his way through thick patches of chamisa, and I followed him through the obstacle course.

The wind was driving an ever-more-muscular fire. Embers and sparks were being lifted and sent sailing. I raised my head and watched as hundreds of cinders came parachuting down around us. Most of the fiery offshoots were burning out before hitting ground, but I could see a few were getting footholds. Soon I'd have more than one fire to worry about.

No one would fault me for calling off the search. It was possible, maybe even likely, that if we kept going the fire would outflank us and cut off our escape route. And yet I was sure if we didn't continue the Strangler would get away, and once free he would kill again and keep killing. The Strangler was twisted, evil, and smart; in short, law enforcement's worst nightmare. There had been few breaks to come out of his cases; this was our chance to nail him.

Sirius sneezed, and without thinking I said, "God bless you." My partner acknowledged my words with a little wag of the tail and then he put his nose back to the ground and started sniffing. He wasn't thinking about quitting. Judging by the bounce in his step and his vigorous pulls on the line, he was locked on his target.

I took the leash in one hand, and with the other I pulled my Glock G28 from my holster. The glow from the fire allowed some limited visibility, but it was still difficult to see because of the curtain of smoke hanging over the canyon.

Sirius started tugging harder and making excited sounds that indicated he had the suspect on target lock. I was tempted to release the missile, but that would have violated protocols. Sirius wasn't the only one that had been trained. The department had pounded it into our heads to announce our presence and the imminent threat we presented. Opposing lawyers always argue that police dogs are just as much of a weapon as a firearm. Most of LA's canyons have squatters, transients, and undocumented workers that throw their bedrolls down in the midst of the brush. It was possible, with the smoke and bad conditions, that Sirius had mixed up the Strangler's

scent with some other human's. As unlikely as that was, I couldn't take a chance.

I reined Sirius in and huddled with him in the darkness, making us as small a target as possible.

"K-9 unit!" I shouted. "Come out with your hands up or I'll send the dog!"

Over the crackling fire, I tried to hear or see any signs of flight. There was no answer to my summons. I called out again, this time in Spanish. My bilingual attempt also met with silence.

My right hand rested atop the crest of my partner's neck. Sirius's hundred-pound frame was tensed and ready to go. I never liked sending him into the unknown, but that was sometimes part of the job.

"*Still,*" I whispered, telling him to be quiet in German.

As silently as we could, we closed in on a formidable stand of chamisa. The thicket was a perfect spot in which to hole up, offering up a barrier to anyone seeking entrance. As we crawled closer, Sirius began doing his pointer imitation. He knew where his prey was. We moved another five feet forward. I wanted to be as close to my partner as possible when I sent him in. You never let your partner hang out to dry.

We stopped and listened. Growing ever closer was the raging fire. It was difficult hearing anything over its roars. I raised myself from a crouch and gave the command that Sirius had been waiting for: "*Geh voraus!*" Go ahead!

Sirius charged into the undergrowth. I saw a blur of black and tan, and then out of the darkness it looked as if there was a rapid blinking of red eyes. I threw myself to the ground; someone was shooting at us.

"*Fass!*" I screamed. "*Fass!*"

People are always surprised to hear that police dogs need to be taught to bite. Thousands of years of domestication and breeding have taken the bite out of Bowser, but by using bite suits and training, and essentially making the biting into a game, K-9 handlers can reverse a dog's inhibition to biting humans. I was calling for Sirius to bite. If there'd been a command to tear off the Strangler's head, I would have been shouting for that. My partner heard the urgency in my voice and tore through the chamisa.

More shots rang out, at least a half dozen in rapid succession, and then I heard a man screaming "Call him off! Call him off!"

By the panicked quavering of his screams, I knew he was being shaken around like a rag doll. I had been on the receiving end of attacking police dogs dozens of times, and I was always glad that the padding of the bite suit was between their teeth and me. It was a humbling—and frightening—experience to be in the grip of those jaws.

The shaky screams grew even louder. The man was afraid he was going to be eaten alive.

"*Pass auf!*" I shouted; Sirius was now being told to guard.

The screaming stopped but not the whimpering. Sirius would stay clamped down on the suspect and not let him move.

I patted around for the dropped Maglite and found it. Only after starting to rise did I realize that blood was flowing down my leg. "Shit," I said. I was hit. The adrenaline that was still pumping had masked the pain. That wouldn't last, I knew. I was afraid of what the light would reveal and started sucking down air. What I saw

made me breathe a little easier. The bullet had struck my upper thigh but missed my femoral artery. There was plenty of blood, but I didn't appear to be in any danger of bleeding out. I took a few measured breaths, fighting off light-headedness. My partner didn't need me fainting.

With an effort I got to my feet and then started limping forward. I shone the light into the brush and caught the glint of Sirius's eyes. Further maneuvering of the light showed that Sirius's jaws were clamped down on a wrist. His captive's face was so white as to appear spectral. Even the thick smoke couldn't cover the man's stink. Sirius had scared the shit out of him.

I moved the light back to Sirius's eyes. There was something wrong. His eyes weren't sparkling.

"T-tell your dog to let me go," the man said. "There's been some kind of mistake here. I'm a firefighter."

He moved his shoulders to show off his fireman's slicker. I said, "Shut up."

I fought through the brush, ignoring the inconvenience of my leg. Branches grabbed and clawed at me; I took them on in a frenzy of panic, and what I couldn't push through I snapped away, finally making it to Sirius's side.

My praise sounded so inadequate: "Good boy."

He was hit in several places but responded to my words with a wag of his tail. I tucked my flashlight under my arm and kept my gun up and ready. I scratched Sirius behind his ear where he liked it best and my fingers came back bloody.

"Your dog broke my arm I think. It hurts like hell."

I didn't reply other than to put the light on the suspect and then scope out the area around him. Sirius's attack had knocked his gun out of his hand, but not before it had done its damage. I pushed aside some brush and pocketed the weapon.

"This is all a misunderstanding," he said. "I came out here to set a backfire. I thought you were the arsonist."

"If you say another word without my leave to speak I will shoot you dead."

He could hear that I meant what I said. All my attention was on Sirius. "What a good dog," I told him, and he wagged his tail once more, but this time the motion was weaker.

"Aus," I said, telling him to let go.

Sirius released his hold on the hand, and then let his head drop to the ground. His body language told me he was pleased he had done his job. It also told me what I didn't want to see.

"No," I said to him. "You are not going to die!"

Sirius didn't understand my words but heard their urgency. He tried raising himself up but couldn't do it.

"You're going to help me carry him out," I told the Strangler. "If you try to escape, I will shoot you. If you stumble, I will shoot you. If he dies before we make it out of here..." My voice caught a little, but I managed to finish the sentence: "I will empty my gun into you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

It wasn't Miranda, and I didn't give a damn. He nodded.

The fire was closing in all around us. I didn't give a damn about that either. My partner was dying.

We lifted Sirius up and started moving in what I thought was the direction of the

houses. It was a guess, though; the smoke was that thick. I didn't even notice my bleeding leg. Time was precious. With every step my partner was losing more and more blood. The smoke was a thick, stinging curtain. We were walking in a blinding fog that allowed no clue as to where we were, or which way to go. It was possible we were walking around in circles, wasting time we couldn't afford to lose. Sirius was making sounds I'd never heard before—scary sounds that came from a body failing him—and then he had a seizure or a series of seizures, and we had to stop walking to put him down. He fought through his spasms and I felt his chest; it was still rising and falling. The seizure wasn't a death rattle. My partner was still with me.

"It's all right," I told him. "I'm here. You hold on, you hear me? We're going to get you help."

Just behind us, a stand of pampas grass torched up in flames. The Strangler screamed, "We have to leave the dog!"

He started to move away, and I raised my Glock and aimed at where his heart was supposed to be. "No!" he yelled, just in time.

The murderer spared me from murder.

We picked up Sirius once more. His breathing sounded like an overheating radiator. Blood was filling his lungs. I motioned the way to the Strangler with my gun. There was no path to go but through fire. We stumbled forward, and it was so hot our flesh began burning, but I wasn't about to leave my partner. The Strangler screamed as his clothes and skin smoked and burned, but he knew I would shoot him if he dropped Sirius.

We avoided fire as best we could, but there was no getting away from it. The inferno was everywhere. "Trailblazing" took on a whole new meaning. I tried to see through the flames, but my eyes had been pummeled by the smoke and were puffy to the point of closing up on me. The Strangler began coughing violently, but even over his paroxysms I could hear the horrible wheezing of my partner. Show me the way, I thought. Maybe I croaked the words aloud. There was a part of me that recognized my flesh was on fire, but that didn't stop me. I couldn't let my partner down. I looked around, trying to see anything. The smoke had blotted out the heavens save for two stars.

"We'll go past the second star and straight on till morning," I said, and the Strangler didn't object.

It was the route to Neverland, at least according to Peter Pan. The Strangler followed my lead, which was better than staying and burning in hell. As we made our way through fire, more of our clothing burned away. There was no escaping the heat; it burned from all sides. Peter Pan hadn't mentioned that. Still, it seemed to me that Neverland was getting closer and closer.

We pushed through some burning chaparral and into a clearing. Water splashed over us and our bodies smoldered, the smoke rising from our rags and fur. The helping hands of surprised firefighters reached for us, and I had enough presence of mind to announce that I was a police officer.

As paramedics rushed over to us, I hurriedly cuffed the Strangler. "We're okay," I told them. "It's my partner you need to help!"

That didn't stop them from trying to help us. "My partner," I said again.

Crazy people carrying guns tend to get your attention. The EMTs ran a few lines

into my unmoving partner. Only after Sirius received medical treatment did I allow myself the luxury of passing out.

CHAPTER 1:

NOBODY EXPECTS THE SPANISH INQUISITION

Returning from Neverland was harder than getting there. Some days I wondered if I'd ever get back.

The limo chauffeuring us pulled up to the curb of the Westin Bonaventure. I hadn't wanted a limo, but the department had insisted. Sirius had liked the ride. The limo had a sunroof that opened, and my partner had enjoyed periscoping his muzzle out the car to catch the breeze. Still, he probably would have been just as happy sticking his head out the window of a MINI Cooper.

The driver ran around and opened our door. I had Sirius on a leash, and Sergeant Maureen Kinsman had me on one, or thought she did. Maureen works out of LAPD Media Relations. She is young and wears more makeup than any cop I have ever seen, including those that work John Patrol. Maureen was perfect for her job. She liked to talk nonstop, which made it easy for me to keep our conversation going with only an occasional nod.

"Once we get to the banquet room, I'm going to introduce you to Kent McCord," she said. "He told me he wanted to meet you before the presentation."

The door opened, and I started as some flashes went off. Three photographers were there to meet us. Hotel guests turned and rubbernecked, assuming that the paparazzi had a star in their sights. What they saw was a slack-jawed man with a scarred face and a scruffy-looking dog.

"The press is all over this," Maureen said, apparently delighted. I did my best to approximate her good cheer.

Somewhere in my therapy I had heard the phrase "Fake it until you can make it." I don't know whether a fellow burn patient said it or a therapist, but for the last six months, faking had become a way of life for me. Because I wanted nothing more than to get back on the force, I was doing everything I could to avoid a forced disability retirement. After Jen's death I didn't really have a life; I only had a job. Getting severely burned had put that job in jeopardy, which terrified me. That was one of the reasons I had agreed to this luncheon. I wanted to show the brass that I was still part of

the team.

Sirius and I followed Maureen. She kept up the conversation for all three of us. All I had to do was offer up my best Bobby McFerrin “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” face, which wasn’t so easy with my scarring. Lots of eyes took notice of us as we walked through the hotel. I told myself that Sirius was drawing their attention, not my face.

I had been brought in with burns on over half of my body surface area, and a good many of those were third-degree burns, or what medical professionals call full-thickness burns. That meant there were patches of my body where all my layers of skin had been burned away. It also meant six months and counting of skin grafts, operations, and physical therapy.

When I look at my naked body in a mirror, the patchwork designs from all the skin grafts make it appear as if I am wearing a harlequin suit. I am told that with time and more therapy the scarring will fade, but that for the rest of my life I’ll be tending to what the burn people refer to as my “scar management.”

I am not the only one dealing with scars and physical issues. Love me, love my scruffy dog. All during my rehabilitation my partner has been doing his own physical therapy alongside of me. I do my stretches and then help him with his. He thinks it’s a great game; I wish I did. Both of us are working on achieving our optimal range of motion, or ROM, as our therapists call it. Sirius and I have both come far, but the fire and being shot took a lot out of us. Sometimes I think we’re the Humpty Dumpty twins, and that neither of us can ever quite be put back together again. This is an opinion I keep to myself, and it’s not something Sirius talks about either. Everyone thinks that Sirius is the perfect patient, and that I’m not far behind. He’s the real thing; I’m the fake.

The mantra of my burn therapist, whom I call the Iron Maiden, is “rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reintegration.” Those are apparently her code words for torture. Whenever I see the Iron Maiden I do my best Monty Python imitation and yell “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” She thinks I’m kidding, but I’m not. Every time I see my inquisitor, my heart races and I get cold sweats on those parts of my body that still sweat, which are those places where I didn’t receive skin grafts. You don’t sweat where you’ve received grafts, which is why burn patients are always mindful of overheating.

The Iron Maiden and I both share a laugh when I call her “my torturer.” Around her I’m upbeat and put on my happy face. I know she’s worked me as hard as she has for my own good. Her torture is necessary so that my tendons don’t shorten, and my ligaments and joints will have the best possible function. Her therapy has worked for me; I now have full range of motion in my legs, arms, and hands. I can flip someone the bird as good as I ever could.

I let Maureen lead me through the hotel gauntlet. She chattered the whole time, and rarely needed me to join in the conversation. “That’s a great suit,” she said. “Where did you get it?”

Jen had bought the suit for me years before, but I’d only worn it a few times. The last time I’d worn it, I remembered, had been at her funeral.

“It was a gift,” I said.

Maureen took up her monologue again. Under the suit she had complimented was a not-so-sharp-looking compression garment; what I called my hair shirt. I usually

wear my compression garment twenty-four hours a day. It is a skintight layer of clothing that extends from my feet to my neck that's supposed to help improve my hypertrophic scarring. The Iron Maiden describes hypertrophic scarring as skin that exhibits the three Rs of being red, raised, and rigid. In my case there's a fourth R—the right side of my face. It's that which shows my trial by fire more than anything else. There's an angry red patch of elevated skin that extends from my cheekbone almost to my chin. When I catch people staring at the scar I say, "You should see the other guy."

Fake it.

My surgeons and doctors seem annoyed by this particular patch of scarring, perhaps because it's so visible. Nowadays, after more than a few operations, there's nowhere else on my body with as much hypertrophic scarring. Around my facial scar there are even a few nasty keloids. One cosmetic surgeon wants to try lipo-filling my face, while another thinks I might be a good candidate for laser surgery. Those potential treatments will have to wait.

Still, someone up high must have decided my face was good enough to be seen in public. Or maybe my facial disfigurement, he or she decided, would better serve the department. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Sirius and I were being used to combat a recent spate of bad press suffered by the LAPD. Months earlier the governor had announced that the two of us would be receiving California's Public Safety Officer Medal of Valor, the state's highest award for heroism. Not long afterward, the LAPD announced it was awarding me its departmental Medal of Valor. When I asked about my partner being similarly honored, higher-ups told me that a recipient of a Medal of Valor had to perform an act displaying extreme courage while *consciously* facing imminent peril. Apparently they didn't think a dog could be conscious of peril. I did and threatened to skip the ceremony. When word of my potential boycott surfaced in the media, the department did a one-eighty better than Kobe Bryant and announced that Sirius would also be receiving a commendation. He was going to get a Liberty Award, the canine version of the departmental Medal of Valor.

Getting medals isn't so bad; getting them in public is. There was a reason for the pomp and circumstance, though. One commander had confided to me that heroes were always good for getting extra departmental funding.

"Here we are!" Maureen said.

I had never seen a meeting room so large. It was like one of those aircraft hangars designed to house jumbo jets. What made it even worse was that as cavernous as the space was, it was filled with people. My heart pounded and my chest and throat tightened, making it difficult to breathe.

"I need to make a pit stop," I said. "Is there a bathroom nearby?"

"There's one just down the hall," she said. "Why don't you meet me back here in five?"

"Five," I said and then took off with Sirius.

The bathroom had urinals on one side, stalls on the other. The stall side appeared to be empty. Sirius and I went into an oversized stall that was designated for the disabled. I qualified, even though I didn't want to. I sat down and fought off the shakes.

The week before I'd met with the departmental shrink, a small man with a big, bald head named Dr. Lockhart. Cops forced to see him call him Doc Rock Hard. Rock

told me he just wanted to have “a little chat.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m really encouraged. Every day I’m getting that much better.”

“Many people that sustain injuries such as yours suffer depression.”

“Not me,” I said smiling. “I’m grateful to be alive. All that physical therapy must be keeping my endorphins up.”

“Do you have any fears of what the future might bring?”

A shake of my head; an Alfred E. Neuman look of “What? Me worry?” “I guess I’m luckier than most. I have a very supportive girlfriend.”

That helpful and imaginary girlfriend was the same one that I had invented for the mental health professionals at the hospital. Her name was Patty Norville and she was an elementary school teacher. Patty helped me with my exercises. The only drawback in our relationship, I said, was that Patty was a cat person. I always laughed when I said that. Patty was supposed to be coming to the next burn patient get-together. I had this feeling that poor Patty would be coming down with a bad cold just prior to the party.

“How are you sleeping?” Dr. Lockhart asked.

“Like a baby,” I said.

“No insomnia or recurring disturbing dreams?”

For once, I was glad of the skin grafts on my face. There were no beads of sweat to give me away. If I’d been a pinball machine, I would have been going tilt, tilt, tilt, tilt.

“Not that I can recall.”

Fake it until you can make it.

My deception fooled Rock Hard, as it had fooled everyone else. They had all bought into my clown act. Smokey Robinson’s “The Tears of a Clown” had become my song.

I had investigated my condition on the Internet. According to the medical literature, I was a textbook case for posttraumatic stress disorder. During the day I can control my symptoms, at least to a degree, but not at night. That’s when all hell breaks loose in my dreams. During any given week, I have the same dream three or four times. That doesn’t sound so bad. The reality is that several nights a week I find myself burning to death.

The dreams feel real. Nothing in my mind tells me that I’m dreaming. I relive what happened. I smell the smoke and feel the fire. All my despair comes back; all my pain returns. My flesh manifests what I feel. When I wake up, my skin isn’t just hot, it’s burning.

When I was a kid I remember my friend Craig Steinberg asked me, “You want to see a match burn twice?” I told him I’d like to see that, so Craig struck a match, blew it out and then pressed the hot tip into my flesh. It hurt, but it didn’t quite burn the flesh. That’s how a match burns twice.

That’s how it is with me. I keep burning. I am the burning man.

In my research I had found one doctor who had written about this phenomenon. He called the dream sequences “mental metabolization,” and according to his research certain patients relived their burning again and again, “often very realistically.”

His conclusion was an understatement. On a few occasions I awakened from my