

—ASH WEDNESDAY

by Lorne Dixon

Everything was a blur, my vision fading and brightening, until the pulsating colors and trembling shapes slowed their spin. I saw broken glass on asphalt, the swaying blue bristle tree line under the Santa Lucia Mountains, the twisting funnels of black clouds against a starless sky. I heard nothing except the hum of my inflamed eardrums. Rolling, standing up, wobbling, shaking, I turned back toward the fire.

I watched as a fireball ascended off the roof of the sprawling building. A line of flame ran across the *Morro Bay Private Mental Health Center* sign, curling the white paint, chewing down into the carved lettering. I snapped my dangling jaw shut and brushed myself off.

The explosion had caught us by surprise, knocking three teams of fire responders off our feet. Our Ladder's Blitz line—two and a half inches of hose—danced on the parking lot like a snake. It struck a uniformed cop, bowling him over, slamming his unconscious body against the Chief's car. Half a dozen firefighters jumped to their feet and tackled the hose and held on until their combined weight and strength wrestled it under control.

The explosion meant the fire had reached the Sanitarium's boiler room. We'd contained it to the offices and Visitor's Center up until then, but now it would spread fast.

"That's the game, folks." Chief Henderscott shouted.

A Volunteer team member from San Luis Obispo ran to my side. He screamed over the fire's roar, "What's he mean by that?"

I shook my head. Only a few scraggly hairs on his chin, the kid couldn't have been more than twenty. I pulled his ear close. "It means the fire just won. We got nothing that can handle the sumbitch. Building's done."

Confusion crossed his face. "Then what now?"

"This just became a pure rescue mission," I told him, careful to lock his eyes on mine. He needed to understand what my words meant—fully understand. "We have to get in there and get those people out."

Confusion turned to panic. "But they're—"

He didn't say the word *insane* but it hung in the air just beyond his lips, almost audible.

"Yes," I said. "They are."

LORNE DIXON

The same horrible thought fluttered through all of our minds, I'm sure, both the veterans of Ladder Six-Fifteen and the weekend adventurers from the eager volunteer squads that had raced to our town. The building was already partially evacuated. *Partially*. The first responders quit pulling patients out when a hallway ceiling collapsed, crushing three of the firefighters. I arrived just as they were regrouping in the parking lot.

Morro Bay divided its patients into three color coded wards. Green Ward was made up of the self-committed and the homeless. Yellow ward was low-level criminals with mental health issues who had managed to avoid jail time in exchange for some time on a shrink's chaise. They were already gone, filed out and moved to the state hospital.

The violent psychotic incurables of Red Ward were still inside. A whisper echoed in my ear, an earlier voice warning me that some of the inmates had gotten loose in the confusion and that some of the staff was missing.

The Chief barked out orders, pairing up firemen with local cops. No one hesitated to follow the Chief's commands. The old man had gone to Korea and Vietnam, neither time on vacation, and his voice carried more authority than the stripes he had earned.

"You're with me," a voice said over my shoulder. I turned and saw Leo McNeiss suiting up. I'd known him since grade school, before he'd moved to the city and become a cop, before scandal had sent him back home to be a small town deputy, before the deep lines in both our faces. We had never been what you would call friends. As a kid Leo hadn't quite been a bully, but he wasn't someone you chose as an enemy, either. He pointed to the young Volunteer from San Luis Obispo, "Both of you."

Shaking, the kid said, "My name's Fenley. Arno—"

"I wouldn't fling a link of monkey shit for your name, son," Leo said, strapping on his breathing gear. I doubted that he had ever used an oxygen unit before but he didn't need any instructions. That was just who he was. He handed over a pair of filtration masks. "We go in two minutes."

Fenley raced to a truck for more gear. Leo rolled a copper fire extinguisher over to me. Stepping in, he said, "We have a special task. I'm sure you remember the name Otto Weissmuller?"

I did. Five years ago, Weissmuller had been arrested and tried on seventeen counts of conspiracy to murder. He'd led a cult of drug-addled teens on a rampage through southern California, terrorized the nation, and kept the newspapers in business.

"This hospital has four wings, not three. The fourth is Black Ward. He's their star patient. It's a big secret. They don't want any of his *family* to try to bust him out." Leo cocked his thumb over at Fenley. The boy fumbled with the straps to his oxygen tank. "Don't want to say anything to him. Would spook him."

"He's already spooked," I said.

Leo attached the feed line to his tank. "Then maybe he's smarter than he looks. When we caught Weissmuller, he was an animal, filthy, long unwashed hair, three inch dirty fingernails—like talons. Barely human. He killed three cops with his bare hands at that roadblock. Bit one patrolman's eye right out of his skull."