

Night of the Bonfire

A Michael Quinn Novel

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Chapter 1

Day 1, early evening

Laguna Beach, California

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD DAY, and it would only get better.

There was the familiar bump as the tires rolled onto the cobblestones. Lloyd Blackwell sighed with contentment as he pulled his black BMW into the driveway of his hillside Laguna home. He put the car in park and listened to the purr of the idling engine.

Business continued to be brisk at his art gallery. Today alone he had sold three of the seascapes that were the specialty of his local artists, the artists who had stayed with him so loyally through the ups and downs of the years.

And in his other life, several months of patient research seemed about to pay off.

He turned off the ignition and sat for a few seconds. The only sound on the quiet street was the soft ticking of the cooling car engine. A glance at his vintage Cartier watch with the worn leather strap told him it was almost six. Over two hours until he was to meet Marie for dinner. Plenty of time to prepare a full report and send it in. He opened the car door and stepped out into the welcoming spring sunshine.

As he walked up the curving cobblestone walkway, he could see through the beveled glass of his entry doors and through the picture window in his living room, the rays of the afternoon sun adding an amber shimmer to the water pouring over the infinity edge of his

backyard pool. The edge had been carefully designed by its architect so that the cascading water gave the illusion, as it did now, of flowing directly into the Pacific Ocean that lay a mile beyond.

He smiled at the attention to detail that had added this small touch of beauty. Beauty, in things trivial and things vital, brought passion to life. Marie brought passion to his life. And tonight would be a special night for her.

He had been rehearsing his lines all day for Marie, his beautiful Marie.

After dinner he would invite her over for a late-night swim at his place. Then, when she least expected it, when she was sitting next to him on the pool's edge looking out to sea, with her long, dark hair dripping wet and her gorgeous body glistening in the moonlight, he would take her hand and say the words he had so carefully composed.

Silently he mouthed his lines again as he stopped under the vine-covered portico. The sweet fragrance of jasmine hung in the air as he turned to his right and punched the keypad buttons to disable his home's security system.

The keypad screen flashed, and the deadbolts drew back with a resonating click. There was the slightest sense of movement behind him. Then, in a heartbeat, he was shoved against the stucco wall next to the keypad, both arms twisted behind his back, a hand on his neck, and a gun barrel pressed firmly against the base of his spine.

The jasmine scent was replaced by the pungent smell of a men's cologne. A voice spoke softly into his ear.

“Good evening, Mr. Blackwell. We are here to pay you a visit. Walk calmly through your front door, as you no doubt do most every night. My men will accompany you.”

Blackwell's face had been slammed with such force against the stucco that he had been momentarily stunned. Spots swam before his eyes, and he could feel blood trickling down from cuts on his forehead and nose and oozing from what felt like a split lower lip.

He licked the blood away, blinked, and tried to see to the sides, but the hand on his neck forced his face firmly against the rough stucco. His peripheral vision saw only a blur of the men holding him on either side, while the hand squeezing his neck and the grip carefully twisting his arms up behind his back told him he was dealing with experienced street fighters.

The entire block had been deserted when he drove up, and his portico was hidden from the street. A shout would be not only useless but suicidal. The gun barrel pressed harder into the base of his spine.

"What the hell do you want, damn it?" Blackwell put defiance in his voice, but with his mouth against the stucco, it came out muffled. At least the ploy would give him precious seconds to assess his chances.

"We will discuss everything inside. Last chance, Mr. Blackwell, or you have drawn your last breath." The voice was calm and composed.

"OK, OK. Take whatever you want, I don't care." The bravado might keep them on the defensive.

As the two men holding him frog-marched him from the portico through the doorway, he blinked to clear away the blood stinging his eyes and stole a glance to each side. He caught a glimpse of thick necks and deltoid muscles bulging against cheap black suit coats. Each man was built like a wrestler, stocky and broad-shouldered. They looked like, and presumably were, bodyguards for the third man. There was no chance of overpowering them.

The two bodyguards carried him into his foyer as if he were weightless, then stood as they waited for further instructions. Blackwell heard the front door close and lock behind him.

“Hood and cuffs.” The voice of the third man again came from behind.

Quickly and quietly a black cloth hood was fitted over his head and tied loosely around his neck with a rope. His wrists were brought around in front and were tightly bound by plastic handcuffs. Next, his ankles were bound with what felt like another set of plastic handcuffs.

“The living-room sofa.”

The two bodyguards obediently dragged Blackwell through the hall and into his living room and deposited him onto the sofa. One bodyguard sat on the sofa next to him, gripping his shoulders tightly. There was a scraping noise of wooden chair legs that Blackwell recognized as coming from the chair facing the sofa, then a creak from the wooden seat. The other bodyguard had sat down there.

Blinded by the cloth hood, bound hand and foot with his manacled wrists on his lap, Blackwell sat still and silently cursed his helplessness. He tried to visualize the scene in his living room, searching for anything that might give him an advantage.

He was sitting near the middle of the sofa. The bodyguard next to him was holding his shoulders in a pincer grip. Directly in front of him would be the small teak coffee table, and beyond that the wood chair where the other bodyguard now sat facing him. To the right of the sofa would be the leather wing-back chair, his favorite chair, where he liked to sit and read. Beyond the furniture grouping was the picture window to the back yard and, if he could somehow get past both bodyguards and smash through the glass, a chance at escape. But where was the man who had spoken, the third man?

Footsteps sounded distinctly on the travertine tile. The third man walked from the foyer into the living room. Blackwell listened carefully as the footsteps stopped somewhere near the coffee table. There was a metallic sound of something being set down on the floor, perhaps an aluminum briefcase or suitcase.

“Quite a charming little home you have here, my friend. A nice art collection, if a bit limited.” The disembodied voice spoke as if it were a visiting neighbor or party guest. “And what a lovely view of the ocean. Outstanding. What is this? Oh yes, this will do.” Footsteps clicked away to the right and stopped. A door opened and closed, and from the slight squeak, Blackwell recognized it as the side door from the kitchen to the back yard.

For perhaps a minute, all was quiet. Blackwell licked the blood off his swelling lips and tried vainly to see through the fabric of the hood. He would have to rely on his senses of smell and hearing to provide clues. Through the fabric he could smell the sweat and street-grime stink of the bodyguard sitting next to him. Both bodyguards sat silently, waiting for instructions.

The kitchen door squeaked open and closed again, followed by returning footsteps. There was a pause and then a clanging noise in the kitchen. The footsteps clicked back into the living room. Blackwell listened carefully. The slightly heavy sound was probably that of some sort of men’s dress shoe.

“Yes, this will do just fine.”

There was a rustle of paper, then a smacking sound on the tile. The man must have swept the art magazines off the coffee table. A soft clank sounded as something metal was placed on the table, followed by the gurgling sound of a liquid being poured into a bowl. An unpleasant chemical odor wafted into the air. Blackwell’s skin began to crawl.

There was a creak from the leather wing-back chair to the right of the sofa. The third man had sat down there. A sharp metallic click cut through the air, a sound Blackwell knew all too well.

“Just in case you are harboring any fantasies about escape, Mr. Blackwell, that sound was the slide mechanism of a 9mm pistol that is now cocked and pointed directly at your belly.”

The third man snapped his fingers. Another sharp metallic click cut through the air somewhere in front of Blackwell.

Of course. Backup. Another gun, held by the bodyguard sitting facing the sofa.

The voice spoke again.

“As you have probably surmised, Mr. Blackwell, that second sound was the slide mechanism of another handgun whose barrel is also trained on your belly.”

For a few moments, the room was silent.

The stale, musty air inside the hood was getting uncomfortably warm, and the rough fabric itched his skin. Blackwell could feel sweat and blood dripping down his chin and onto his neck. He licked the salty mixture off his lips and swallowed, his mind racing. Not only was he blind and nearly immobile, it was three against one. The bodyguard sitting next to him was gripping him so tightly his arms were going numb. The second bodyguard was sitting directly across from him with a gun drawn. And the third man sat in the leather wing chair as if he were an invited guest, a guest with a 9mm aimed and ready.

Even if he could somehow break free of the bodyguard holding him, he would be riddled with bullets before he made it to the picture window.

“The safe is in my bedroom. There’s fifty thousand in cash in there.” He projected his voice forcefully through the cloth hood. “I’ll give you the combination. Jewelry’s in the top

dresser drawer. You can take the cash and jewelry and be on your way. I swear I won't tell anyone." It was a desperate gambit, but his best option was to turn this into a robbery.

"Thank you for the kind offer," replied the third man, as if declining a dinner invitation.

"We are not interested in your cash or jewelry. We are only after information. *Specific* information." The voice lingered on the emphasis.

Blackwell stiffened involuntarily. What could they know?

Did they *know*?

"I can put some of your fears to rest, Mr. Blackwell. We have no particular desire to kill you or even harm you. If you provide us with the information we need, we will render you unconscious and then take our leave. We are not in any police database, and we will leave no trace that we were ever here."

The leather sighed as the man leaned back in the wing chair. "I am, among many other things, an art collector like you, Mr. Blackwell. I share your appreciation for the finer things in life. And I am not here after any of your little home collection. Or your money, for that matter. Rather, I only desire to know everything you know about one particular"—he paused—"work of art."

"I don't know what the hell you are talking about. Everything I have for sale is on my gallery's website," Blackwell protested innocently. Inside the cloth hood, blood was trickling down his forehead and stinging his eyes. Sweat ringed his neck, and his heart pounded like a hammer against his chest.

The man sighed, as if disappointed. "You know precisely what I am talking about, my friend."

The leather squeaked softly as the man shifted his position. “Forgive me. Perhaps you do not fully understand because of what you cannot see. From your backyard storage shed, I brought in a white jug of what is called muriatic acid. It is a variation of hydrochloric acid, and it is commonly used to clean pools.”

The wing chair creaked, followed by a clank of metal against metal.

“That sound, Mr. Blackwell, was the sound of my gun barrel tapping against a large steel mixing bowl, obtained courtesy of your kitchen and now sitting in front of you on your coffee table. That steel bowl is approximately half-full of the acid.”

The voice took on a professorial manner, as if lecturing a student. “Most people have serious misconceptions about the nature of torture, Mr. Blackwell. They think it must be done as they see it in movies, with specialized machinery or exotic electronics or some other dedicated device. In reality, everything that is needed to successfully interrogate someone through torture can be found in most households.”

The voice added a patronizing tone. “This is a topic you would never come across in your soft, rarified world of art galleries and salons. But should you reflect on it, you would realize that successful interrogative torture is based, not so much on pain, but rather fear.”

He heard a guttural sound as the third man cleared his throat and continued. “You probably know that if you spill muriatic acid on yourself, you may suffer a slight burn, a first-degree burn. You flush the skin with water, bandage the area, and the burn will heal. That is the end of it. If you should be so unfortunate as to spill a larger amount on your bare skin, you may perhaps suffer damage down to the second layer of skin, incurring a second-degree burn, and thus a trip to the local urgent care clinic would be in order.”

Blackwell sat still, alert for any clues his senses could provide. There might not be much time. He tried to envision the exact positions of the two guns trained on him, and he pressed against the bodyguard holding him, feeling for a concealed gun or knife.

The third man continued, warming to his topic. “However, have you ever considered the effects if your skin—let’s say, your hand—is deliberately immersed in the acid and held there?” The voice paused, as if for dramatic effect. “In a very short time, the acid will burn through all three layers of skin. Such a third-degree burn will cause massive damage as the acid continues to eat through to the tissue and bone underneath.

“You would, of course, feel great pain. Agonizing, indescribable pain. But worse than the pain is the knowledge that you are being horribly scarred and disfigured—forever—as such damage would be far beyond the ability of any Newport Beach plastic surgeon to repair. Now imagine that, once we have finished with your hand, we move on to other parts of your body.

“Do such thoughts cause great fear, Mr. Blackwell? I imagine they do.

“It is such fear, and not the associated pain, that truly makes for a successful interrogative torture. Pain is temporal; it passes, and many brave soldiers and warriors have been conditioned to withstand astonishing amounts.”

In a silky tone, the voice continued. “Fear, on the other hand, is very different. Fear, you see, can be *infinite*.” The voice paused to emphasize the word. “It is fear’s infinite capacity that can make the most strong-willed subject eager to blurt out every secret he may possess. In your case, my friend, it is the fear that is no doubt dawning upon you right now, that you will spend the rest of your life hideously disfigured.”

The voice went silent, as if expecting a response. When none came, the voice resumed, now slightly louder. “What we are asking for is merely information, information that cannot

possibly be of much value to you. If you cooperate, you will wake up tomorrow looking very much like you do now. You seem successful and quite fit for an older man. Surely you have a keen interest in your own self-preservation?”

Inside the confining hood, Blackwell’s heart pounded as if it was next to his ears, and the foul air felt suffocating. Sweat mixed with blood had trickled down from his neck to his chest, and his shirt was sticking to his skin. He sat silently on the edge of the sofa, his mind churning.

The voice became louder still, and for the first time showed a trace of irritation. “My friend, you have gotten involved in something far beyond your comprehension. You are in well over your head. You have—”

The man hesitated and exhaled as if in exasperation. When he spoke again, the voice had recovered, its tone once again calm. “Mr. Blackwell, I do not wish you to think we are not humane. If you do not see the light and cooperate, we will begin slowly. In all candor, however, I must admit that the way to create the greatest amount of fear in a subject is to begin the torture slowly. Assuming you are right handed, we will start with, say, three fingers of your left hand. We may even let you choose which fingers. Then, if necessary, we will proceed to more vital parts of the body. Eventually, we will come to your face. Alas, when we reach that point, you will not see for much longer, as we will start first with your eyes.”

There was a pause followed by a scraping noise as the wing chair moved slightly on the tile.

“From the photographs on your mantel, Mr. Blackwell, it appears you have family. Surely they care for you? I see two daughters—here they are as little girls, and then over here they are grown. But no wife? You are divorced? Ah, I see the picture of you and your daughters at your wife’s gravesite. So you are a widower. So sorry.”

Another pause as the wing chair again scraped on the travertine. The man was shifting the chair to look somewhere else. Then the voice continued. “But wait. What is this we have here at the end of your mantel? From this photograph it appears you now have a girlfriend. And what a lovely young woman she is. You have good taste. She looks like quite the sensual type. I would guess you are passionate about keeping her.”

The wing chair scraped loudly as it dragged across the travertine. Blackwell could hear the man breathing, and a whiff of cologne penetrated the cloth fabric of the hood. The man had moved his chair closer and was leaning toward Blackwell. His voice taunted, “Perhaps in this case, after your fingers are gone, we should proceed next to your manhood. How long will your pretty girlfriend stay with you after that, Mr. Blackwell, when you are not only blinded and disfigured, but no longer even a man?”

The room was silent.

With a sigh Blackwell sat back on the couch. His shoulders sagged, and his body seemed to go limp. His words came weakly through the cloth hood, and his tone of voice had gone from defiance to surrender.

“OK. You win. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. But I’m going to pass out from my circulation being cut off. Can you get your man here to ease up a bit with his grip? I’m not going anywhere.”

“Of course,” the man replied. He snapped his fingers, and the wing chair creaked as he leaned back.

The bodyguard holding Blackwell grunted in assent and slightly relaxed his grip.

Blackwell’s hooded head sagged down on his chest in relief. As he did so, his shoulders slumped, and his feet slid forward slightly until they were resting on the base of the teak table.

His handcuffed wrists lay passively in his lap, and his breath came in short gasps, as if his fear had caused hyperventilation.

“Relax, my friend, relax. We don’t wish you to have a coronary. You have my word that all we want is information.” Confident in victory, the voice still retained its mocking tone.

Blackwell took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

Three, two, one.

Quickly he kicked both feet up at the underside of the small coffee table. There was a *thump* as the table flew up in the air, followed by a *clank* as the steel bowl was launched forward off the table.

In one swift motion, Blackwell jack-knifed his upper torso forward onto his lap and with his hands wrenched off the hood. As he did so, there was a soft splashing sound and muffled *phffts* as a 9mm bullet, followed by another, buried into the sofa back where he had been sitting.

There was an excruciating scream from the man in the wood chair sitting across from Blackwell, followed by the clamor of a steel bowl and then a gun clattering to the tile floor.

The bowl of acid had hit its target.

His eyes blinking to adjust to the light, Blackwell quickly glanced around the room. The bodyguard sitting across from him was clawing helplessly at his face, howling in pain, writhing and kicking wildly. The man’s gun lay on the floor near the overturned bowl. The bodyguard sitting on the sofa next to Blackwell had released his grip and was leaning forward, caught off guard and hampered by his own bulk, grunting and clumsily reaching for a gun that seemed to be stuck in a shoulder holster inside his suit coat.

Blackwell’s right elbow lashed out and jabbed hard into the bodyguard’s left eye. As the man doubled over screaming, Blackwell wrapped his right arm around the bodyguard’s thick

neck and shoved the man off the sofa and across the floor onto the flailing body of the other bodyguard. With a loud crash, the wood chair fell over backwards and both bodyguards tumbled to the floor.

His eyes turned to the leather wing chair. There sat the third man. Blackwell caught a glimpse of a tanned, well-dressed man with dark features twisted in an angry expression. Then he noticed the man's suppressor-equipped gun barrel moving to take aim, and he immediately dove face forward onto the floor.

As his face hit the cold tile, there was a *phfft* from the man's gun, followed by a sharp burning sensation down his back and a loud *crack* as the bullet ricocheted off the travertine next to him. From the floor he looked up and saw the sneering face and the 9mm barrel lowering to fire again.

With a scream that echoed off the tile floor, Blackwell sprang up to his right, his manacled hands outstretched and closing in on the moving gun barrel.

