

A family saga spanning more than twenty-five years.

Journey's End

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PROLOGUE

“SORRY I’M LATE,” Vanessa Markham gasped, out of breath. “The traffic was abominable and I couldn’t find a parking place.” She leaned forward and kissed her friend Marcie’s cheek. “How are you?”

“Fine, looking forward to your anniversary dinner next week. Where’s Cory taking us?”

Vanessa sank into a chair and reached for a sip of iced water. “It’s supposed to be a secret, but I know for a fact he’s made reservations at Emilio’s.”

“Wow, I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard that they serve wonderful food.”

They examined the menu and both decided to have chicken Caesar salad. When the waiter brought their order, Vanessa realized that she had forgotten to eat breakfast and was ravenous.

“That was good.” She pushed her plate away. “I was so busy getting Cory off to his opening event this morning that I forgot to have anything to eat.”

Marcie cast an envious look at Vanessa’s slim figure. “No wonder you never put on an ounce, you hardly eat anything.” She glanced down at her own plump form. “I only have to look at food and it settles on my hips.”

Vanessa laughed and pulled her friend onto her feet. “Come on, an afternoon’s shopping will sweat pounds off you.”

They drove to a quieter part of town and parked outside a small boutique. The window display overflowed with a mixture of day and evening dresses. Vanessa gazed at them while Marcie turned off her car.

A small bell tinkled as the two women entered the store and a tall, slim, exotic-looking woman approached them. Her thick, dark, long hair hung to her waist, as straight as a die and her skin was tanned.

“If you need any help, I’ll be over in the lingerie department,” she said, showing off a mouthful of sparkling, white teeth.

“Thank you.”

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Full-length mirrors on all the walls gave the store the appearance of being twice its size. Racks of dresses had been arranged with the customers in mind, allowing them plenty of room to move around and see their bodies from a variety of angles. A large circular seat, upholstered in red velour, sported a tall vase of fresh tropical flowers on a shelf behind.

The heady scent of hibiscus and frangipani filled Vanessa's nostrils, bringing back happy memories of her honeymoon in the Caribbean. She closed her eyes for a moment and reminisced. The sand had been soft and hot under her feet when Cory led her down to the water's edge. The sound of a steel drum band wafted in the distance as Cory pulled her into his arms. Their bodies moved in unison as they danced to the romantic music, the surf rolling and splashing over their ankles.

"What do you think?"

Marcie's voice jolted Vanessa back to the here and now. "Excuse me?"

"I said what do you think of that black one over there?"

Vanessa's eyes picked out the large dress. "It's nice. It would suit you."

Marcie took the dress from the rail and went in search of the assistant while Vanessa perused another rack. She lifted down a white, grosgrain dress, but when it wasn't her size, she returned it to its place.

Across the other side of the room a flash of color caught her eye. She stood in front of a rail and reached forward. Hidden between two other dresses she spotted red silk and pulled it forward. She gasped. Soft folds fell from the scooped neckline to the waist, from which flared out a circle skirt. The short, capped sleeves scalloped at the edges, were in a lighter shade. The effect was dramatic and she held her breath as she reached for the tag. Relief flooded over her when she saw it was a four, her size.

She walked toward the assistant. "Can I try this one, please?"

"Yes, follow me."

They walked over to a line of cubicles and Vanessa entered the first one. She peeled off her tee shirt and pants and undid the zipper

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on the red dress. With knees shaking, she turned to look at her reflection. Her hand reached for the band on her hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders. The dress molded itself to her slim form and the flared skirt accentuated her long legs. She twirled around and felt the soft material caress her thighs.

“Are you in there?” Marcie’s voice came from outside her cubicle.

“Yes.” She slid back the curtain and sashayed out.

Marcie’s jaw dropped in amazement. “Wow, you look fabulous! Why can’t I look like that in a dress?”

“Madam looks neat and smart in that little black number.” The assistant said from behind.

Marcie grimaced. “Oh, yeah, but I want to look something else instead of smart one day. Buy it—that dress was made for you.”

As Vanessa looked in the mirror, large brown eyes stared back at her. The red silk suited her tanned complexion, so she nodded her assent and returned to the cubicle to change back into her day clothes.

“Well, that didn’t take long.” Marcie said, as they headed for their cars with their dress bags. “Jim will be surprised. He always thinks I take too long to buy clothes. Mind you, he’s happy with slopping around in jeans all day, so I don’t know how I’m going to get him to dress up for your anniversary dinner.”

The now darkening sky caught Vanessa’s eye and she made a mental note to close her sunroof. Ominous, black clouds scudded overhead and litter swirled around, spiraling with the strong wind.

“He can wear jeans if he wants. I don’t think there’s any dress code at Emilio’s.”

“No way! He’s going to have to learn to wear something different. Next year he’ll be forty, but he still thinks he’s a teenager.”

“Don’t we all. Sometimes I find it hard to believe that I’ll be twenty-seven soon. Cory wants to have a big party for my birthday, but I think I’ll wait until I turn thirty. Not that I’m looking forward to that—it sounds so old.”

Her friend gave her an exasperated look. “Believe me, it doesn’t hurt, it’s just another day. You’re lucky you’ve all that ahead of you. In a few years I’ll be hitting the big four ‘O’, too.”

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Vanessa smiled at her friend. Although Marcie's weight was on the heavy side, she had a beautiful face with high cheekbones. After having three children in rapid succession, her figure hadn't had chance to recover between pregnancies and she had never managed to lose the extra pounds.

"Ah, but you have three wonderful children to make up for all that. I can't seem to get pregnant. We've been trying for months now."

"Maybe you're trying too hard. I've heard of couples getting pregnant when they least expect it."

They said their goodbyes in the parking lot, arranging to meet the following day to shop for shoes with their other friend, Jenna.

As soon as Vanessa climbed into the car, she reached up and closed the sunroof. By the time she pulled out onto the main road, large spots of rain plopped on the windshield. She switched on her wiper blades. The mid-afternoon traffic was light, so she decided to take a short cut home.

Once she had turned up the ramp to the highway, she found herself in a long line of slow moving vehicles and knew she had made the wrong decision. At the first opportunity she turned off that road and onto the cross-town expressway. The bad weather had brought a multitude of cars from the woodwork and Vanessa drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

With limited visibility she screwed up her eyes and slowed, peering through the windshield. Rain ran in rivulets from the verges onto the road and the spray from the other cars was blinding. A glance at the clock on the dashboard showed that it had been an hour since she had left the dress store and she muttered under her breath.

The gap widened between her and the cars in front so she depressed the accelerator, increasing her speed. At this rate she would soon be home. From the corner of her eye, Vanessa saw a large tanker trundling up the ramp. It failed to slow and yield to the traffic on the highway. Red brake lights lit up her windshield. The cars in front slowed.

Vanessa swore and stamped on the brake. The vehicle riding alongside blared his horn. She gripped the wheel as her car aquaplaned. This time she pumped the brake. The car in front loomed

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closer. Her course didn't change. She yanked the wheel and her car and the world spun. She ploughed into the other vehicle. The impact caused a pain to jar right up her arms to her shoulders and neck. Her chest slammed against the steering wheel. The noise was deafening.

She sat still for a moment trying to analyze where she hurt. Her body ached all over. Her wiper blades slogged the heavy rain away from her windshield. A sudden movement caught the corner of her eye. Her head whipped round. Flames licked the underside of the tanker, two cars away. A wave of panic rushed over her. She tasted blood from her chewed lower lip and concentrated on trying to open her door. It was jammed hard and wouldn't budge.

By now other people were getting out of their cars and moving around.

"Help me!" She shouted, pounding on the window with her palm. "The door's stuck!"

She tried to shake the door, but no one came to help. Panic pumped through her and her eyes darted around the interior of the car. She spotted the catch for the sunroof above her head and tugged it with trembling hands. At first it wouldn't budge, but then it began to slide back.

She stood on the seat, reached for her dress bag and hauled herself up swinging her legs round until she was sitting on the roof. The rain pelted down and people ran everywhere. Her long hair was in her eyes. She slid down the windshield on her belly and onto the hood. The flames outside the tanker had grown higher. She jumped to the ground swiping her soaking wet hair from her eyes. Another car was jammed into the rear of hers, so she scampered across the carriageway away from the accident site.

Her breath rasped in her throat and her feet pounded the tarmac. Her ankle twisted and she stumbled, leaving behind a sandal. She hurried on, limping as fast as she could. Crowds of people were bunched together talking, some on the road and others still sitting inside their cars. She waved her hands, trying to scream and warn them of the imminent danger, but her voice was barely audible. Just as she reached a grass verge, an enormous roar sounded from behind accompanied by searing heat. Voices screamed and then nothing.

CHAPTER ONE

CORY'S FRIENDS JIM, Todd, and their wives, Marcie and Jenna, all arrived at the house for Vanessa's memorial service at ten thirty. A black limousine picked them up and drove them to the church. Cory wore a dark suit with a black armband and his friends all wore dark clothing. As they sat in the back of the car, Cory wrung his hands. This was going to be harder than he feared. Ever since Vanessa's death, he had tried to detach himself from the truth to save himself going insane with grief, but now the time had come to face reality.

The church was full as the five friends walked down the aisle to the front pew. Cory recognized several people he knew and inclined his head toward them. Vanessa and he had not been staunch churchgoers and sometimes attended Christmas and Easter services.

The minister stood at a maple lectern and began to speak. Cory let his mind drift. He tried to pretend this wasn't happening and the spoken words didn't sink in. They sang two hymns and Vanessa's sister gave the eulogy.

"Vanessa Markham was a beautiful, wonderful person. She wasn't my real sister, the same family adopted us both, but we were as close as any sisters could be. When our parents died, she was the one who comforted me and helped me through that difficult time. Even although she was married to a well-known man with an opulent lifestyle, she didn't change. She would have given you the clothes off her back if that was all she had. That was the sort of kind, caring person she was. A light went out of my life the day they told me she had died and, even though I'll always miss her, I'm sure she's happy as one of God's angels in heaven."

Cory began to shake and Todd placed an arm around him. After a prayer and another hymn, they all filed out the church and back into the limo.

At the hotel a waiter stood with drinks on a tray at the entrance to the hired room. His friends all reached for a glass. The women took

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wine and headed for the buffet, which had been set up in a corner. Cory grabbed a glass of whisky and swallowed it in one gulp.

“That was tough,” Jim said. “I wanted to cry myself. Man, you handled yourself well.”

Cory nodded as a nagging pain tore at his insides. The reality that Vanessa had gone hit him hard. Until today, he had fooled himself that none of this was happening, but the memorial service had brought home the truth.

Several people shook his hand, offering condolences and commenting on the tasteful ceremony. Cory felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see their agent, Tony Bartell.

They shook hands. “How’re you holding up?” Tony asked.

Cory shrugged. “Okay, I’ve been better.”

“I know this isn’t the time or place, but I wanted to let you guys know that a cruise line sailing out of Fort Lauderdale is looking for a band to do a couple of three day cruises later this year. Would you and the guys be interested?”

“Hmm, that should work out well. I’ll have a word with the others and get back to you.” The last thing Cory wanted to think about was work, but maybe it would ease the constant pain. “Thanks for coming, Tony. It means a lot to have the support of you all here.”

“You’re welcome, old son. Call me about those cruise line gigs.”

By the time the limo took the five friends back to Mulholland Drive, dark clouds raced across the sky and the windshield was spotted with rain. The change in the weather mirrored Cory’s mood. The two other couples said their goodbyes and set off in their cars for home.

Cory pushed open the front door and stood listening to the silence. This was how his life would be now that Vanessa was gone. His breath caught on a sob and he staggered into the family room, collapsing on the sofa. He dropped his head in his hands and let his grief pour out.

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With his elbows on the desk Cory stared at a large framed photo of his wife. Right now he wanted to die, too. He had been in suspended

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animation the last four months. Perhaps he should swallow some pills and go to sleep forever? No, he wasn't that brave. His father had done that when Cory was a small boy and left his mother to cope alone. No good would come if he died now. No purpose would be served.

His mother had recovered from his father's suicide, married a nice man and now lived in New York. She and her husband had been in Europe at the time of Vanessa's accident and Cory was glad they were unable to attend her memorial service. His mother still treated him as if he were a small boy, cooing and aahing—he couldn't have stood that.

His attempts to get back to work during the last few months had failed. He still longed for solitude. His friends meant well and he loved them all, but he didn't need their pity. God had been kind enough to lend him one of his angels for a few years, but that period of his life was over and he had to move on alone. Every now and then he allowed himself the luxury of remembering Vanessa's velvet touch and how her kind ways had changed him from an arrogant, hard rock musician, into a much better person.

Then he would recall the day he had been notified of Vanessa's demise. He had returned from spending the day opening a new shopping plaza. His face ached from smiling at avid fans, vying for autographs.

He entered the house by the kitchen door letting it close with a bang. "Vanessa," he shouted. "Honey, are you home?"

When silence answered him, he walked into the family room and poured himself a Scotch. He leaned back in the recliner sipping his drink and smiling. Vanessa would still be shopping with Marcie. He knew how they were when they got together. It was either talk, talk, talk, or shop, shop, shop.

He reached for the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a long, narrow box. As he lifted the lid, diamonds sparkled. The bracelet was one Vanessa had seen a few weeks ago and he had bought it today for an anniversary present.

He hummed to himself as he climbed the stairs to his dressing room and kicked off his damp shoes. A sudden idea entered his mind and he grabbed a piece of manuscript paper and began to write down

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the notes as a melody played inside his head. Vanessa always laughed at him. He kept sheets of paper stacked everywhere because he never knew when the urge to jot down music would happen. He continued to write, engrossed with the tune.

Darkness had almost fallen by the time he walked into the bedroom. He switched on the light and reached for a blue, cotton sweater, pulling it over his head.

Cory padded barefoot back down the carpeted staircase, realizing he was hungry. Vanessa wasn't much of a cook and wouldn't hear of employing a housekeeper, so numerous nights they ate out or ordered in food. He opened the fridge, but as usual, it was bare. One of the kitchen cabinets revealed his favorite cookies, so he grabbed a handful, a glass of milk and settled in a chair in the family room to watch the news.

When seven thirty came he decided to call their friend, Marcie, to see if Vanessa had stopped off with her, but she wasn't home and no one answered the phone. He frowned. Maybe they were on their way over here. He would give them thirty minutes before he ordered Chinese food.

The bell outside the wrought iron gates rang. He crossed the foyer to the intercom and pressed the button. "Yes?"

"Is Mr. Markham there?" A gruff voice asked.

Always wary of strangers, he stiffened. "Who's calling?"

"This is the Highway Patrol, sir."

His heart gave a lurch. "This is Cory Markham. Can I help you?"

"Do you know a Vanessa Markham?"

A cold shiver ran down his spine. "Yes, she's my wife. Is she all right?"

"May we come in, sir?"

His hand shook as he pressed the button for the gates to open and walked to the front door. A black car with a white roof and doors was parked on the drive. Two officers stood with serious faces. One was tall and wiry with a thin face and the other was stockier. They followed Cory into the family room and he signaled for them to sit while he remained standing.

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"I think you should sit down, too, sir, we have some bad news," the stocky officer said. "There's been an accident." Cory felt the room tilt as he reached for the arm of the sofa and sank onto it. "I'm sorry, sir, but your wife was involved in a multi-car pile up on the expressway and didn't make it."

He stared at the two officers. "What do you mean didn't make it? You can't mean she's dead?" He heard disbelief in his voice. "No, it can't be. She's gone shopping with a friend and anyway, she doesn't come home that way."

"I'm sorry sir, but it's been confirmed that her car was one of those involved, and all casualties have been accounted for."

Cory wanted to laugh. It was ridiculous that he was sitting here discussing his wife's death in a calm voice while all the time he wanted to scream that it wasn't true.

"What...how did it happen?" He stuttered. "Can I go to her?"

He noted the look that passed between the two officers. The thin one cleared his throat. "Hmm, a gas tanker exploded and her car was burned."

Cory wanted to scream. He placed his hands over his face and a wave of nausea washed over him. "Oh, my God! Vanessa!"

"Is there someone we can call for you, sir?"

His reply had been automatic. "Jim Spears."

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Cory roused himself from his reverie and focused his eyes on a pile of papers. The den was a mess. His guitarist's wife, Marcie was right, he should employ a housekeeper, but the thought of another woman in Vanessa's house made him balk. Still, the time had come to take control and get his life together again. He needed a change.

Cory trudged upstairs and meandered about his dressing room. A black leather outfit hanging in the far corner of his closet caught his eye. Stroking it, he tried to recall how long it had been since he had worn it. He reached to the top shelf and took his helmet down, buffing it with the sleeve of his shirt. His sudden decision to take a trip pleased him and he packed a bag.

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Their cat, Lacy followed him as he padded down the stairs in his thick socks wearing his leathers and carrying his boots, gloves, bag, and helmet. Opening the door into the garage, he sat on the step tugging on his boots before crossing to the corner to where a large piece of canvas covered his motorcycle. A small frisson of pleasure ran through him. He had bought a new, black, Honda Gold Wing GL 1000 the previous year and Vanessa had never liked him riding it. She always thought it too dangerous. In the past he had owned several motorcycles, but buying this new Gold Wing had been a real thrill.

He peeled off the cover, placed his bag in the storage compartment and wheeled the cycle out of the corner and through a door. When the house was built, he arranged to have a separate room added adjoining the garage, which he used as a workshop. This had a separate entrance and he opened that door and pushed the motorcycle out.

The cold air hit his face before he donned his helmet. Lacy sprinted past and disappeared into the shrubs. She would be all right until he came back. He flung his right leg over the body of the vehicle and cranked the engine. It rumbled to life. He pointed the front wheel in the direction of an opening in the hedge at the back of the house and roared off.

Cory turned off Mulholland Drive onto Lakeridge Place and afterwards Cahuenga Boulevard. Before joining the Golden Gate Freeway, he stopped to fill the tank and sped off again, lowering his head into the wind to become one with the machine. He welcomed the familiar throbbing of the engine pulsing through his belly and thighs and was exhilarated to be on the open road again. When he had been driving for two hours, he turned off an exit, parked outside an all night diner and went in.

A young woman with short, spiky hair, a skin-tight mini skirt and an earring in her nose sauntered up to him.

“Coffee?” she asked in a bored voice.

He took off his helmet. “Yeah, please.”

She filled a mug to the brim with dark steaming liquid as he slid into a booth.

“Menu?”

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He nodded, amused at her monosyllabic questions. His last meal had been a salad the previous lunchtime and he realized he was hungry. The clock on the wall showed a few minutes after midnight, but he didn't feel tired.

The bored woman shuffled over. "Ready?"

"I'll have sausage, bacon, two eggs over easy and wheat toast."

She wrote in her notebook. "Potatoes?"

He shook his head. The coffee was good, hot and it revived him. He forced himself not to think of the reason why he was here alone. He pushed the happenings of that awful day four months ago to the back of his mind, pretending it was six years ago and he had never met Vanessa. This was his way of coping with his tragic loss. Somewhere in his mind he apologized to her. She deserved better than this, but right now he had to cope in his own way.

After several mugs of coffee, he set off again and was soon turning onto SR46. An hour and a half later he was tooling down U.S.101 with no idea where he was headed.

The sky was lightening as the sign for Monterey flashed past, so he took the next exit. He turned onto Eighth Street and onto Tenth finding himself in Park Avenue. The Hilton and The Hyatt Regency Hotels loomed ahead and instinct steered him in their direction, but at the last minute he changed his mind, continuing along Aguajito Road before turning left into Fremont Street. A large sign for The Blue Dolphin Motel caught his eye and on the spur of the moment, he turned and parked in front of the main building. The sign on the door said, 'Office Hours 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.'

He switched his engine off and glanced at his watch. Six thirty-five. He climbed from his machine, rubbing his butt while he bent and flexed his knees. The five-hour drive hadn't tired him, but his body ached with using different muscles. It had been years since he had taken a long drive and it had felt good to be riding again.

He strolled along the line of cabins and stopped at a paper vending machine stacked with copies of that morning's L.A. Times. Outside the office was a wooden bench fixed to the wall, so he sauntered over to read the paper and wait. His butt still hurt. At one time he had been

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a member of the Gold Wing Iron Butt Club, but he had let that lapse. Now he was more of a soft butt.

He opened the paper and flicked through the first few pages until a noise caused him to lower it. A pair of brilliant, blue eyes stared at him. The small child had a turned up nose sprinkled with freckles and long, golden hair, which sat in curls on her shoulders.

“Are you the Boogie Man?” She asked, wide-eyed.

“How do you know about him?”

She climbed onto the bench and sat cross-legged. “My grandpa told me about him and he comes to my room at night.”

“Who, your grandpa?”

“No, silly—the Boogie Man.”

He folded the paper and placed it on his lap.

“Oh, I see, and does he look like me?”

A small frown creased her brow and she shrugged. “I don’t know I’ve never seen him.”

They sat in silence and he wondered what a small child was doing here at this time in the morning.

“How did you get here?” he asked.

She smiled up at him like a chubby cherub. “I live here.”

“Oh, so you’re staying in one of the cabins.”

She gave a chuckle and shook her golden curls. “No, I live over there with my mommy.” She pointed to an adjacent white house with a red tiled roof. “I skipped breakfast.”

As he looked across to the house, the door opened and a young woman stood with her hands on her hips.

“Polly!” She called in a raised voice. “Breakfast, Polly!”

The child covered her mouth with her hands and giggled, ignoring the woman’s cries. He watched the woman pull the door closed and walk down the path in the direction of the motel.

As she neared and saw the child, a deep frown crossed her face. “Polly, why didn’t you answer me?” She turned her attention to Cory. “I’m sorry I hope my daughter wasn’t bothering you?”

He pushed himself to his feet and felt gigantic compared to this woman’s dainty frame. She stood no more than five feet tall with the same golden hair and blue eyes as her daughter.

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"No, I've only just arrived."

She unlocked the office door and looked over her shoulder.

"Did you want to check in?"

"Yes, I've been driving all night."

He felt the need to explain his disheveled condition and stubble on his face. Polly followed and stood next to him while her mother went behind the counter and switched on the lights.

"Is it for the one night?" She pushed a large book toward him.

"Do you have a weekly rate?" His question came out of the blue. Until he said it, he had no intention of staying longer than one night.

"Yes."

She quoted him an amount and he handed her a wad of bills before writing Corrigan Markham in the register. She handed him the receipt and reached for a key.

"Are you superstitious?" she asked.

Her question took him by surprise and he had no idea what that had to do with anything. She looked embarrassed.

"Number thirteen's at the end and it's the quietest cabin, but I won't put you in it, if you're superstitious."

"No, number thirteen's fine."

She led the way along the wooden, covered walkway and he followed with Polly at his side. The room was light and airy with pine furniture and a queen-sized bed. One wall had two prints of exotic beaches and the bedspread was appliquéd with large shells. A television was perched on a stand, and in the opposite corner, a coffee maker sat on a wide shelf with a small refrigerator underneath.

He gave the woman a smile. "Thank you, this is nice."

Polly took a short run, jumped up on the bed and sat swinging her legs. Her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her down.

"We offer guests complimentary breakfast between eight and ten each morning. I'm in the office until ten this evening and if you need me out of office hours, dial double zero and you'll get me at the house."

He took the key from her. "Thanks."

Polly waved as her mother closed the door and Cory flopped on the bed—now he was tired. He hadn't had much sleep in the last

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twenty-four hours. Why he'd decided to stay in Monterey, he had no idea. Perhaps he felt this was the place to help heal his wounds.

He pushed himself to his feet and trudged along the walkway to where his bike was parked. Polly was sitting on the bench and she watched with interested eyes as he wheeled the bike back to his cabin and lowered the stand. He took out his bag and paused outside the door, looking back at the child. Her mother came out of the office and gave him a nod as she took her daughter's hand and led her inside.

He opened the door, turned on the TV, unpacked his bag and took a long hot shower. His reflection in the bathroom mirror showed a tired, drawn face and a chin covered with dark stubble. He reached for his electric shaver and paused. Today was Sunday and he had no commitments until Wednesday of next week, another ten days. By that time he would be sporting a decent growth. When he went downtown later, he would buy shaving foam and disposable razors, to groom and shape the stubble into a beard.

He pulled on a pair of faded blue jeans and a tee shirt, slipped his feet into a pair of soft, leather moccasins, switched the TV off and picked up his room key. The aroma of coffee was strong as he strolled along the walkway to the office and pushed open the door. The reception desk faced him and in an alcove were a few round tables each with four chairs. Donuts, Danish and bagels sat under a muslin cover, while a pot of coffee bubbled on a hotplate.

Polly's mother looked up and smiled. "Hello again." She indicated the food and drink on the counter. "Please help yourself."

He nodded in the direction of a young couple at a table in the corner and poured a paper cup full of coffee. Polly sat on a chair by the window swinging her legs and chewing gum. He lowered his tired body onto a chair at another small table, sipping the coffee and feeling the drink revive him.

Polly trotted over. "Where's your uniform gone?" She asked, hitching her small frame onto a chair opposite. "Don't you want a donut?"

"Polly!" Her mother's voice was sharp. "Come over here!"

She pulled a face and slid off the chair, dragging her feet as she joined her mother at the counter.

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Cory sipped his coffee watching Polly's mother place two donuts on a plate. She walked over and placed them in front of him.

"My daughter's worried because you're not eating, so I've brought you these. I'm sorry she's being such a nuisance. She doesn't usually bother guests, but she's taken a real shine to you."

"That's okay, but I'm not much good with kids. They see things too literally and that scares me." The young couple rose and murmured goodbye and Polly held the door open for them. "Do you run this place by yourself?"

"In a way. My parents own it. They've put it up for sale, so I don't know how much longer I'll be working here. I think they have some people interested already."

She sat in the chair opposite and leaned her chin on her hand. He took in her pouting lips and long, golden blonde hair that cascaded down her back. Dark lashes caressed her cheeks as she sat with lowered eyes. When she raised them she caught him unawares and her candid gaze startled him.

"Have you decided what you're going to do then?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Find another job, I guess. Are you taking a vacation?"

"In a way. I don't have to work until the middle of next week." He stroked his chin. "I'm growing a beard."

A faraway look came into her eyes. "I like beards, my husband had one."

Polly came over, stood next to her mother and eyed Cory. "Why is your face all rough and scratchy?"

They both laughed. "Polly!" Her mother said. "Stop asking questions. Mr. Markham's face is no concern of yours."

The child wrinkled her nose and scowled. "But how can I find out things if I don't ask? Don't you want those donuts?"

Cory smiled and shook his head. This child was incorrigible. Her brain flitted from one subject to another like an elusive butterfly and yet she made his heart feel lighter.

He pushed the plate toward her and her eyes gleamed. "You can have them if your mother agrees."

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The woman stretched her hand across the table. "I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Kate Sanders."

They shook hands, "Cory Markham."

He held his breath, waiting for her response, but none came. Perhaps she wasn't fond of music and had never heard of him. Her daughter looked about five or six, so Kate must be in her twenties. If he hadn't known she had a child, he would have thought she was a teenager.

She pushed herself to her feet and took Polly's hand. "Well I'd better get on, we've a large party arriving later today and I've four cabins to get ready. It's been nice talking with you. Have a good vacation."

Mother and daughter disappeared through the door behind the counter and he left the office to return to his cabin. The bed looked inviting, so he flopped on it with his hands stacked behind his head.

The next thing he knew it was two in the afternoon. He sat up and shook his head, feeling like a bag of shit. Sleeping during the day always made him feel hellish. He staggered over to the corner and filled the glass, coffee pot with water before ripping open one of the complimentary sachets of grounds. A thousand gnomes hammered in his head and he made a mental note to buy some aspirin, too.

By the time his face was washed and he'd cleaned his teeth the coffee was ready. Soon he felt more human again. He flipped on the TV to catch some local news. A store had been evacuated because of a fire and a dog had savaged a small child. When a camera shot of the beach came onto the screen, the blue ocean made him yearn for a swim. He remembered seeing a small pool and hot tub behind the motel and decided to investigate.

Pulling on a pair of swimming shorts, he grabbed a towel from the bathroom and walked behind his cabin. A picket fence bordered the pool, along with oleanders and hibiscus. The small gate creaked as he closed it and placed his towel on a lounge. Pool water sparkled and rippled in the sunlight. Taking a short run, he plunged into the water. His head broke the surface and he shook the hair from his eyes, noticing a small figure sitting on his towel.

JOURNEY'S END

As he turned and dived again, feeling the water rush past his ears, he bumped into something. The chlorine stung his eyes as he peered at a floating bundle of clothes. For a second he didn't recognize the child. He scooped her into his arms and raised her high above the water. Her small body writhed as she screamed and Cory struggled to prevent her slithering from his arms. He stepped from the pool, grabbed her by her ankles and held her upside down, shaking her.

"No!" She shrieked. "Don't throw me back, I can't swim!"

He took her in his arms and sat her on a chair. Tears coursed down her face and she trembled with fright.

"It's okay, you're safe now." Cory bundled her into his towel, ran with her to the office and pinged the bell.

Kate came in with a smile on her face, which disappeared when she saw the two dripping wet forms. "Oh, no! Polly, are you all right?"

"She's fine," Cory said, unwinding the child from the towel. "I think she's more frightened than hurt. She fell in while I was swimming."

Kate turned Polly round and held the weeping child's chin as she looked into her eyes. "Now, what have I told you about keeping away from the pool when you're on your own? Maybe you'll listen to me in future." The child nodded. "Now go over to the house and put on some dry clothes and come straight back."

The child opened the door and went out wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Kate took a deep breath. "I can't thank you enough for what you did, Mr. Markham. She might have drowned if you hadn't been there."

"No problem, glad I could help."

He returned to his cabin with a scowl on his face, beginning to regret paying for a week's stay. His frugal upbringing had taught him to be careful with money, and although the amount he'd paid in advance wasn't a fortune, he wasn't prepared to waste it. Perhaps he could manage to keep away from Polly. He didn't want a child or anyone becoming attached to him. The one person he loved and wanted was no longer alive.

JORDAN HALL

As he yanked off his wet shorts a wrenching grief overpowered him. He sank to his knees in the bathroom and sobbed.

“I’m so sorry, darling,” he spluttered. “I should have been there with you. I shouldn’t have let you die alone and frightened.”

The thought of Vanessa trapped in her car left him with a nagging pain inside. Maybe one day he would forgive himself for not dying with her and stop hating his agent for booking him to open a new shopping plaza that day. But until then, he needed no one, not even his friends.

A family saga spanning more than twenty-five years.

Journey's End

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