

Don Pendleton

Ashton Ford, Psychic Detective

Eye to Eye



By the Creator of The Executioner Series
And the Joe Copp, Private Eye Thrillers

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Creator of
The Executioner: Mack Bolan Series
and
Joe Copp, Private Eye Thrillers

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Whispers From the Soul

Metaphysics of the Novel

The Cosmic Breath: Metaphysical Essays

For Ernest Holmes...wherever. I hope he would have liked this book. I hope he still would.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Author's Note

To My Readers:

Ashton Ford will come as something of a surprise to those of you who have been with me over the years. This is not the same type of fiction that established my success as a novelist; Ford is not a gutbuster and he is not trying to save the world from anything but its own confusion. There are no grenade launchers or rockets to solve his problems and he is more of a lover than a fighter.

Some have wondered why I was silent for so many years; some will now also wonder why I have returned in such altered form. The truth is that I had said all I had to say about that other aspect of life. I have grown, I hope, both as a person and as a writer, and I needed another vehicle to carry the creative quest. Ashton Ford is that vehicle. Through this character I attempt to understand more fully and to give better meaning to my perceptions of what is going on here on Planet Earth, and the greatest mystery of all time.

mysteries: the *why* of existence itself.

Through Ford I use everything I can reach in the total knowledge of mankind to elaborate this mystery and to arm my characters for the quest. I try to entertain myself with their adventures, hoping that what entertains me may also entertain others—so the books, like life itself, are not all grim purpose and trembling truths. They are fun to write; for some they will be fun to read. To each of those I dedicate the work.

~Don Pendleton

Chapter One: A Certain Perception

There is something about the stilled presence of a dead human body that is downright unsettling, especially if the corpse has ripened a bit and begun to decompose, because the first thing to then hit you is the odor—and it is an odor unlike anything else you may ever encounter. Once you get past the odor, a sensitive person might next be struck by the apparent incongruity of the scene—dissonance, if you will, as though everything is out of whack here, inharmonious, something hideously wrong or evil—especially if the corpse is that of a once beautiful woman—and that perception may then well lead you into a morbid apperception that death is an unlovely and unnatural state of being.

I was experiencing all of that and more that cool December morning in Griffith Park beside the bloated corpse of Mary Ann Cunningham, a twenty-year-old coed from Pasadena, by all accounts a sweet kid with a very hopeful future in astrophysics until Death overtook her in the observatory parking lot. She had apparently been raped, strangled, and unceremoniously tossed over the wall to slide down the steep hillside like so much litter, discarded when no longer needed, like an empty beer bottle or a sack of trash.

Incongruous, yes, appallingly so, and monstrous when apperception leads the mind to a realization that this beautiful, fragile package of life was callously sacrificed for a fleeting pleasure.

That was my initial reaction, anyway, and it was a rational one. We'd had a lot of these cases in Los Angeles in recent years—the so-called serial killers, sexual psychopaths, etc., who roam our streets like lobos and kill for entertainment. Mary Ann seemed the typical victim—stripped, abused, murdered, carelessly discarded. She had been missing for five days, last seen at the Griffith Park Observatory, where she worked part-time, at about noon on the preceding Monday. It had been a warm and windy day, with the observatory peak cloaked in misty clouds and occasional light rain. Mary Ann had a two o'clock class in Pasadena; she customarily left the observatory at noon on Mondays and picked up a fast-food lunch on her way to Cal Tech. Two co-workers at Griffith witnessed her exit into the parking lot bundled in plastic rain gear. She never got to the class at Cal Tech and did not return home that night. Worried parents began calling hospitals at about midnight and filed a formal police report the next morning but no police action was taken until the following Thursday when Mary Ann's car was found parked at a MacDonald's in Eagle Rock just outside Pasadena.

How did *I* get into it? Sheer accident, or so it seemed at the time. Greg Souza had called me at the ungodly hour of seven o'clock that Saturday morning and asked me to meet him at the observatory. I had no contact with the guy for nearly a year. We did some time together in the navy. Intelligent work. He is now a private investigator, doing business in Los Angeles, and he would bring me in occasionally as a consultant. We were never exactly friends. In fact, our personalities really clash. So we sort of avoid each other, while at the same time respecting each other. And he would call me from time to time. I had managed to help him with a couple of baffling cases. I am a psychic. Or something. I don't read minds or prophesy, none of that stuff, but I do get certain insights now and then which cannot be accounted for in ordinary terms. So I am a sort of a psychic. I am also a graduate spy, and so I have

learned a little about solving puzzles and developing information.

~~Greg Souza called me that Saturday morning and told me that he needed my help with~~ "terrifically important" case on which he had been working for several weeks. He had hit a dead end and was hoping that my "mental gifts" could start him along a fresh track. That is about all he told me on the telephone but I was accustomed to his tight lip and mysterious ways so I did not press for details at the moment; I just looked at the bedside clock and groaned and agreed to meet him at nine o'clock at Griffith Park.

I don't know how you feel about astronomical observatories, but I have to say that the atmosphere in these places always gives me a rush—almost a religious feeling. When you think about it, a look into deep space is really a trip to the past. These things taking shape way out there at the edge of the observable universe are really just ghostly echoes of events that took place long before the human race appeared on this planet. When the astronomer informs you that the object you are viewing is 400,000,000 light-years away, what he is really saying is that the object is so distant that it takes 400,000,000 years for the light from that object to reach the lens of the telescope—so what you are looking at through the lens could have winked out some 390,000,000 years ago, but we won't know that for another ten million years, when some lucky guy gets to "witness" the death of a galaxy which really has not existed during the life of man on earth.

I get a rush, yeah, just to be reminded of time in such big gobs and to realize that the primordial universe of some ten to twenty billion years ago can still be detected by my senses and dissected by our sciences as though the whole magnificent procession is passing right by our windows right now. Gives me a shiver, and maybe that was what set me up for Mary Ann.

This observatory is mainly a teaching facility now, except for the daily planetarium shows which are open to the public. It was nowhere near showtime and apparently there was not a lot of teaching scheduled for Saturday mornings; the place was just about deserted except for the caretakers and a few staff members. Souza was waiting for me at the check-in desk, conversing casually with a very pretty woman in designer jeans, spike-heeled boots and a lumberjack shirt, who he introduced as Jennifer Harrel and, almost in the same breath, referred to as *Dr. Harrel*—but I did not get from the introduction any amplification of the lady's identity.

She came across a bit cool but I gave her a ten on my scale anyway. With the spike heels, she was about my height. I would have called her age in the midtwenties but allowed another few years to account for that *Dr.* before her name plus a mature poise and manner. Can't say that I really liked the lady, right off. I sensed an element of condescension in her manner bordering on rudeness. Souza had introduced me as "my colleague" but she fixed her gaze on a spot several inches above my eyes and asked me, "What do you do, Mr. Ford?"

Not "how"—"what."

I muttered, "Whatever comes up," and added, with a nasty glance at Souza, "Even at seven o'clock on a Saturday morning. What's the problem here, Greg?"

He took the two of us in hand and led us several steps away from the empty desk before telling me in quietened tones why he'd awakened me at 7 a.m. It's one of the things that always bugged me about the guy. He has a basically conspiratorial mind and a flair for the dramatic, one of those guys who could make a routine weather report sound like a vital national secret: Are you cleared for this?—listen, I have it on the very best authority—I mean from an unimpeachable source—I am absolutely positive that it will be fair and warmer today.

So he pulls Jennifer Harrel and me into a tight clutch in an empty room and, in a voice probably worried about hidden microphones and/or concealed cameras, tells me, "The least I say about this f

the moment, the better. I don't want to say anything to throw you off. Jennifer, listen to me. This guy is fantastic. I mean, this guy is beyond belief. The things I've seen him do..." Which was a damned lie. He hadn't seen me do a hell of a lot. "I know how you feel about this sort of thing, but what the hell. Fine, great, he'd set me up with a hostile client. "We're at the point where we just have to say, okay, that's it, kapootie, or we have to dare to try something that some people might think of as kooking it, okay, that's where we're at."

Greg Souza is five-foot seven and weighs 210 pounds. He looks like Al Pacino, overweight. But he's hard all over and a tough son of a bitch, let me tell you. Otherwise I would have hauled off and decked him, right there.

Instead, I said, mildly, "Greg, don't sell me. You've hauled my ass out of bed, now tell me why. Before he could get a word in, I said to the lady, "Don't expect Mandrake the Magician and maybe you won't be too disappointed. Let's give it a shot. What's the problem?"

She was giving me a cool appraisal as Souza told me, still barely articulating, "Like I said, I don't want to give you too much—no, belay that—I have to be honest with you, Ash—there's a lid on the thing—I *can't* give you much. Look, it's a missing person. Male, white, age seventy-two, missing since the middle of October. Walked out of this building in broad daylight and never seen again. Now you take it. Take it from there."

Like giving a bloodhound a sniff of an old shoe and saying, "Okay, boy, go get 'im."

I said, "You know I need more than that, Greg. Did the man work here?"

The lady looked at the floor and told me in a cool, controlled voice, "'The man' is a senior astrophysicist, one of the world's best. He is largely retired but still takes on graduate students from time to time and he was doing a lecture series here at Griffith for the lay public. He has an office here. Would you like to see it?"

Souza was all smiles as she led us to a small, almost bare office in the rear. She threw the door open, almost defiantly, and stood aside while I entered. I went in and sat at the desk in a creaky swivel chair, lit a cigarette, relaxed. It was not so important that I "see" the office. I wanted the office to "see" me. And something "came" almost instantly. Understand, I have no control over these things. I can't command nothing, invite everything. And something came. Don't ask what it was; I don't know what it was. I just felt compelled to be up and out of there, and as I passed Dr. Harrel, I casually asked her, "Who is Mary Ann?"

She shook her head and gave me a cold reply. "Pretty good guess, there must be millions of Mary Anns, but it doesn't ring anything here."

"There is no Mary Ann, Ash," Souza said, aggrieved by my apparent strikeout.

I said, "Shut up, Greg," and pushed past him, went on along the back hallway and out a rear door onto the parking lot.

It was heavy on me—some cloistering, wriggling emotion that had my spine dancing and my eyes smarting—moving me out across the mist-enshrouded parking area and along the low rock wall, down the gently curving drive. I must have been walking quite fast; I was vaguely aware of Souza huffing along to the rear. I paused once and looked back, I guess to get my bearings, saw Jennifer Harrel following at a distance. But I could not stop and I could not wait. Something was doing me, and it was doing me urgently. Let me make it quite clear I did not know where I was going, nor why. This particular type of "psychic" activity is a form of surrender, a total surrender of the will, a willingness by the "psychic" to be influenced. I was not in a trance, and I could have killed the whole thing in an instant by simply taking back the responsibility for my own actions. I do not pretend to know the source or the nature of the influencing force. I know only that it sometimes comes to me and I sometimes accept it.

I was not trying to be cute when I said that I wanted the office to see me. I believe the thing may work both ways; the influencing force, whatever it is, may need a receptive center on which it can focus—and it may need to feel an attraction to that center. I will elaborate on that later. For now, I just want you to know that I was not in some sort of robot mode, out there on that mountaintop. I knew where I was and who I was; I just did not know where I was going, or why.

But of course you must know, by now, where I was going, and why. This is how I found the mortal remains of Mary Ann Cunningham; or, to put it another way, it is how Mary Ann found me.

I could smell her from the roadway, and I am surprised therefore that she had not already been discovered.

Greg Souza knew immediately what that odor meant.

So did Jennifer Harrel, moments later, when she joined us at the scene. "Oh my God, it's *that* Mary Ann," she moaned sickly.

I felt like crying, and I felt like hitting or kicking something, though I had never known this young lady in the bloom of her life. And I was stuck in the apperception that a death such as this is a monstrosity in a rational universe. Things simply should not happen this way, especially not now when the human mind can straddle the entire universe, not now when the ingenuity of man has allowed him to actually hear the residual echoes of the "big bang" that started it all to going... not now. This sort of death belonged to another place and time.

But then I was reminded that time and place are always relative and that the past just keeps on booming along at the speed of light, looking for a place to land. Maybe there is a planet in a neighboring galaxy where right now furry little animals are beginning to descend from trees and walk upright—and ten million years from right now, a descendant of one of those may bend his head to a reflecting lens and marvel at the destruction of a galaxy at the edge of the universe. Then he will step outside and another descendant who for whatever reason never evolved sufficiently in his own mind to even wonder about the edge of the universe will bash him over the head, turn out his pockets for a few coins, then trash him.

"Thank God," said Greg Souza.

"Thank God for what?" I growled.

"Well, that it's not the professor."

"It's all of us," I said. "It's every damned one of us."

Souza did not get that. Jennifer Harrel did. She took my hand, and squeezed it tightly, and murmured, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls..."

It takes a certain perception, yeah, but a death like this touches us all. And the bell tolls, maybe clear to the edge of the universe.

Chapter Two: Point of View

Her beauty is not of the type that leaps across a room at you; it sort of steals over you and takes you by surprise in the close examination—a quiet beauty, deeper, more organic than cosmetic, much of it coming probably from the eyes or from behind the eyes, although the physical angles and planes are pleasingly harmonized, as well, the look of Jane Fonda or Ingrid Bergman in their prime—opposed to, say, Jane Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe—and you feel comfortable with that kind of

beauty, whatever the situation. Having said that, I guess I'm not sure I know what I mean by "comfortable"—though that word certainly describes the feeling—unless I am trying to say that Jennifer Harrel's beauty was not provocative, did not really invite subconscious seduction scenarios or other masculine tensions—which, I guess, is another way of saying that she was not sexy, which is not true, at all; she is a very sexy woman—but maybe, I guess, not at first, not right up front, her sexiness steals over you and surprises you the same way her beauty does.

Such, anyway, was the general content of my thought as we sat across from each other in a quiet coffee shop on Los Feliz, just down the hill from the observatory.

"You're an unusual man," she'd just said to me, so I guess I was thinking that she was unusual, too.

We were both tired and cold and jangled from a long vigil on the hillside with officialdom—and probably from an overexposure to Greg Souza, also—and I was also thinking that it was just a bit remarkable that here we were, the two of us, sharing intimate coffee after such an unpromising beginning.

Maybe she was thinking the same thing, because she quickly added, "If I seemed cool to you at first, it was probably because I very nearly detest that man."

"Why don't you fire him, then?" I asked casually.

"Can't," she replied, smiling ruefully. "Didn't hire him. But I feel obligated to cooperate. I don't have to like the man—hell, I'd warm his bed if that was the only way to find Isaac."

"Isaac is...?"

"The missing man, yes, Isaac Donaldson. You've probably never heard of him, but anyone who ever took a course in solar physics—"

I interrupted to say, "I have, and I've heard, and I'm impressed—but I've heard nothing about his disappearance. Surely that would be worth a mention on the evening news."

She said, "Isaac was working on some secret project for the government when he disappeared. I assumed—he's so absentminded these days—I thought at first he'd just forgotten to say good-bye to anyone and he's just sequestered somewhere on this secret project, but..."

"But now?" I prompted.

She raised her hands in a mystified gesture. "We can't find anyone in government who'll own up to him. And when one of my associates went to the police for information, someone very high in the L.A.P.D. personally delivered the message that 'the situation' was 'federally sensitive' and that we should leave it alone."

I thought about that for a moment, then asked her, "What about his family?"

"Isaac has no family that I know of," she replied. "He was an only child. He never married. Parents died before I was born."

"You are...?"

She smiled. "A friend and a disciple. I adore the man, the only one I've ever known who I would consider marrying, but I'm a couple of generations too late. He wouldn't have me, anyway" She showed me a gold band adorning her third finger, left hand. "Isaac put this ring on my finger the day I received my doctorate, as a reminder of something he'd told me while I was an undergraduate. I asked him why he'd never married. He told me he'd taken a lesson from the church. Priests don't marry, nuns don't marry, he said, a true scientist also should not marry because it is all the same work. If a scientist is not thoroughly absorbed by his work, he told me, then he is not a good scientist, and the work—the work, he said, with a capital 'W'—cannot tolerate a bad scientist."

I said, quietly, "Interesting point of view."

She twisted the ring on her finger and said, "Not only that, but it's true."

I said, "The right man maybe could change your mind about that."

She shook her head. "About marriage, maybe, but I would have to give up one for the other."

I decided to change the subject. "So who," I asked, "called in Greg Souza?"

"He's very mysterious about that," she replied, frowning and still twisting the ring. "So much so, fact, that I first thought he was connected to the government. He didn't actually say so, but..."

I said, "It's possible. He has had federal contracts in the past."

She blinked and asked, "For what?"

I shrugged. "Greg was in Naval Intelligence. It's all one small, crazy world, the intelligence community. There are those times when it is convenient for one agency or another to farm out certain routine tasks. Greg has contacts. He gets some of the work."

Her eyes narrowed just a bit as she inquired, "How do you happen to know all this?"

I said, "I was part of that community, too, once."

She was cooling again. "He told me he had retained you as a psychic consultant."

I said, "Well, that sounds a bit more formal than the reality. I knew Greg at ONI. He—"

"What is that?"

"Office of Naval Intelligence. We were—"

"Why did you leave it?"

I held up my left hand to show her bare fingers. "Used to be a ring on this hand, an Annapolis class ring. Decided I didn't want to be married to the navy. Or to anything else, for that matter. So I..."

"So you do what?" "

"What do you mean?"

She was still frowning. "For a living."

I said, "Oh," and waved it away.

"What does that mean?"

I smiled. "It does me."

"You're worse than Souza," she said, but with a tiny smile.

I said, "God! Then let me change the impression, quick. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what you do for a living."

I said, "This is embarrassing."

"Why is it embarrassing?"

"Because I don't do anything for a living. Oh I do stuff, sure, lots of stuff. But I don't do it for a living. I do it because it's interesting. And somehow, along the way, I pick up enough money to keep going."

She said, incredulous, "Don't you have any ambition?"

"For what?"

"For anything! Don't you have a goal in life? A program of some sort? A direction, at least?"

I told her, "Sure I do. I want to go on living the way I live right now. What's the connection between Mary Ann and Isaac?"

She blinked, trying to shift mental gears, and said, "What? Connection? There's no connection."

I said, "Then why did I pick her up in Isaac's office?"

She blinked again and said, "How do I know that you did?"

I told her, "Doesn't matter whether you know it or not, I know it, and I feel that there has to be a connection."

"Look, I'm sure you're very sincere—I mean, you probably think that you know what you're talking about, but..."

I said, "But it's all hogwash."

She said, "Okay, you said it, I didn't."

"Where's your scientific objectivity?" I asked her. "Can you argue with the result? I found the girl's body."

She said, "Any dog could have done that. Maybe you caught the odor."

I replied, "Any dog didn't. But let's leave it at that, it really isn't important to the question. Marjorie Ann was a part-time employee of the observatory. Isaac spent time there. Were they associated in any way? Did they know each other, work together, eat together—what?"

She was really agitated. "Why are you trying to link a sadistic rape-murder to the disappearance of a sweet old man? What are you trying to say?"

I guess I had become rather agitated myself, because I slapped the table with an open palm with enough force to

rattle the coffee cups in their saucers and said to her, "It's all one fucking world, Jennifer! It's all tied, all connected, in some fine way! Goddamn it, you ought to know that! You're wearing that goddamn ring, I'm not! Now look at it! A man disappears and a girl dies, almost beneath the same roof and within a few weeks of each other! We call that a coincidence, damn it, only after every other question has been exhausted!"

I had made a scene. My voice, I guess, was as forceful as my open palm on the table. Not many people were in that coffee shop with us, but those that were there were staring our way with open interest.

Even before I had finished my little speech, Jennifer was making her move. She scooted her chair back, dabbed at her lips with a napkin, picked up the check, and left me sitting there with spilt coffee dripping onto my lap. We had each driven our own car from the observatory. I sat there, feeling like a jerk, and watched her pay the check and leave.

The other patrons had lost interest already. The waitress came over with a sweet, understanding smile and asked if I would like more coffee. I accepted a refill, lit a cigarette, and sulked for ten minutes—trying and failing to justify the outburst to myself. She was a condescending bitch. Well, not a bit condescending, maybe, but certainly no bitch. A typical goddamn liberated woman, probably frustrated sexually and... Wait, no, what are you doing, Ash—you insulted the lady, damn it, you used foul language and... She was baiting me, I know she was baiting me, just couldn't wait to cut me up and watch me bleed. Hey! Hey, hey, hey! What is this shit? You were a *pig*! Who was being condescending to whom? You called into question her scientific objectivity! You played mysterious mystery a la fucking Greg Souza and then you lectured her—at Ph.D., damn it, and you lectured her—then you had to go all the way as Mr. Macho—no, as Mr. Neanderthal—banging the damned table and splashing coffee all over the damn...

You have probably been through it yourself, in one way or another, at one time or another. So you must know how I felt. I had really begun to *like* this lady, and I guess maybe I was beginning to entertain subconscious seduction scenarios, because I was really feeling ragged about the whole thing.

Besides which, I had begun to get a feeling for Isaac Donaldson and that whole question. I had studied the man's work at Annapolis and again at war college, and I remembered how I had admired his almost mystic feeling for the natural sciences. If that man was in trouble, then... Well, hell, I needed to be involved in that. Maybe I was already involved in it, and maybe that's why I blew it with Jennifer Harrel.

I would have to give her a call, and...

Well, no, I would not have to do that. The lady was walking toward me at that very moment. She stood beside the table and, without looking at me, said, "Well are you coming or not?"

I said, quietly, "Sorry. I hadn't finished my coffee."

"Leave it," she said. "It's much better at my place."

The waitress was smiling at me.

I put a buck on the table, got up, and followed Dr. Harrel outside.

Everything, believe me, was better at her place.

Chapter Three: A Compensation

I followed the good doctor in my own car, which can be pretty tricky anywhere in Southern California, but she'd taken the precaution of jotting down a Glendale address in case I "couldn't keep up"—sheer jest, no doubt, in view of the fact that she drives a Jaguar sedan while I was snorting along about two inches off her rear bumper in my impatient Maserati.

The Maserati is my chief vice. No, of course not, I cannot afford such a toy—and I will agree that no automobile ever built or dreamed of being built is worth that kind of money— but what the hell, every man has his folly: the Maserati is mine; she's my compensation for every thing I never had and never will have. Everyone should have a personal folly. So you can always say to yourself, in bad moments, "Well, maybe I'll never have a million bucks to call my own... but damn it, I've got my folly." Or, "Okay, she thinks I'm a jerk. But that's okay. I've got my folly." I've got mine, and she's the last thing I will ever surrender. When she's too old to run then I'll just put her up on blocks in the living room, or something, and maybe someday I'll be buried in her. Then people can say, "Well, old Ash never really made much of himself in life but, by golly, you've got to hand it to him, he'll spend eternity with his folly."

Anyway, the Maserati stayed right with the Jaguar all the way up the Glendale Freeway and into the Verdugo Mountains. I was not surprised that the lady lived in this area; made beautiful sense, with Cal Tech right next door in Pasadena, the Mt. Wilson Observatory just on up the hill along Angeles Crest, Griffith Park twenty freeway minutes away—besides which, Glendale is a beautiful community with an abundance of upper middle class neighborhoods at an altitude a bit above the normal smog belt.

I was a bit surprised, though, by the house at the end of the trek. I would not expect a young scientist to live in poverty, exactly, but I was not prepared for a hillside mansion, either, complete with electronic gate and circular drive, pool, tennis court, and still half an acre or so of lawn. Well, what the hell, I thought, people in Southern California know how to live well, that's all—for some their home is their folly. They may eat hobo stew seven nights a week—but God, look at that beautiful home!

Somehow, though, I very much doubted that Jennifer Harrel ate hobo stew even once a week; just did not seem the type. I said to her, "Some crazy joint you live in."

She said to me, "Thanks. That's some crazy car you drive, too."

I shrugged and said, "Well, a Jag is only half bad."

"It has twelve cylinders," she said proudly.

I smiled and corrected myself. "One third bad, then."

She laughed delightedly—really, a very nice sound—and led me through a Venetian foyer and up two steps to the most sensual goddamned living room I have ever seen. I am talking damasks and velvets and fine oriental silks, nude sculptures in marble and bronze, coffee tables of glass and

acrylics that are really *wet bars*, sectional sofa groups that could nicely accommodate several groups, gropes all at once, ankle-deep pile carpeting, expensive-looking artworks everywhere. One whole wall was a curved glass bay and overlooked about 120 degrees of the Los Angeles basin, clear to the edge of the earth. A domed ceiling was about forty feet above all that. A circular steel stairway climbed gently around the walls and into the dome which was, naturally, a small observatory.

I just stood there speechless, immersed in all that, until Jennifer took my hand and led me to the window bay. Then all I could say was, "Nice, very nice."

"When the weather cooperates," she told me, "I can see Catalina. But the city lights," she added, "are really prettier under an overcast, like tonight. When it gets dark, you'll see. And remember I told you so."

It sounded as though she was planning on my staying awhile—an idea which I found not particularly unattractive. But I stood there like a bump on the carpet and again gave my brilliant commentary. "Nice, very nice."

"Get comfortable," she said softly. "I'll go put the coffee on. Or, take a tour, if you'd like. The whole crazy joint is yours."

Didn't I wish. Well, after all, I had the Maserati. And my beach pad at Malibu, a lesser folly.

I took that tour, though—maybe only as inventory, I don't know; I think I was hung up on the sheer grandeur of this working girl's home and trying to compute income versus outgo and it simply did not compute. Mind you, I have been inside of better mansions and I have seen private art collections far more valuable than the one in this mansion. But I was recalling fragments of a conversation on a hillside in Griffith Park in which Jennifer Harrel was drawing parallels between her own struggle for an education and the one just ended for Mary Ann Cunningham, and it had been my distinct impression that Dr. Harrel was from a family of modest means; I was also recalling her story about Isaac Donaldson placing the "Bride of Science" ring on her finger—so she had not married into this. I am a certified Bachelor of Science myself, so have heard all the recruiting pitches and know somewhat about the earnings potential of scientific careers—and this "crazy joint" no way computed with that.

The master/mistress bedroom suite—(I'm no sexist)—was larger than the average family home. It was split-level. A full bath, a Jacuzzi, and a sit-down wet bar with three overstuffed backrest stools uncrowdedly shared the entry level with a walk-in closet and a vanity area to shame some cosmetic shops. The bed, capable of sleeping a basketball team, shared the lower-level window bay with a French antique desk, a projection-TV and lush sectional sofa. The same million-dollar view was available from any spot; even from the john, if you leave the door open.

The rest of the house—and there was probably another ten-thousand square feet or so—wandered away in various directions and at various levels of two to three steps up or down. There was a library and a game room and a projection room, several ordinary bedrooms, various nooks and crannies and short hallways serving as art galleries, a large formal dining room, a couple of informal dining nooks, an island gourmet kitchen with hanging brass and stainless, which is where I finished my tour just as the coffee was being readied for service.

"Still nice, very nice?" Jennifer inquired, without looking at me.

I said, "Oh yes—nice, very nice."

She laughed softly. "Surely an obvious man of the world, such as yourself, is not intimidated by an opulent display."

Which gave me an excellent opportunity to be a total ass and satisfy my curiosity with some dumb question but I resisted stoutly; replying, instead, "Everything about you intimidates me, Dr. Harrel."

She gave me a soft, mocking laugh and a sparkling glance as she carried the coffee tray past me. "Oh sure." She summoned me with a jerk of the head. "Follow me, scaredy-cat."

I followed, To the split-level bedroom. She set the coffee service on the bar, said, "Sit!—drink!"—and went on to the john.

I sat, poured a cup of coffee from the silver pot, lit a cigarette, and wondered.

You must know what I wondered.

Dr. Harrel came out of the john a moment later, switched on the Jacuzzi, pointed to it, said "Undress!—bathe!"—then stepped into her walk-in closet.

I quit wondering, carried my coffee to the Jacuzzi and left it there while I went to the john. Then undressed and "bathed," just as the lady ordered.

She came out of the dressing room wearing a large white bath towel like a sarong and joined me at the Jacuzzi, sat across from me, removed the towel and arranged it carefully behind her, turned back to give me a dazzling smile and a flash of luxurious boobs bobbing just beneath the surface of the agitated water, then said, "Oh damn! I forgot my coffee!"

I muttered—casually, I hope, "I'll get it"—snared a towel from a stack on the floor beside me and cinched it about my waist as I climbed out of there.

"Just black," she said, eyeing me with no trace of timidity.

I brought the whole tray over and set it beside her, removed my towel, stepped in next to her and sat down in close contact. It was electric as hell. She pointed with just a finger toward the opposite side and said, "Over there, sailor." But she said it with a smile.

I moved to my appointed spot, tasted the coffee, said, "Nice, very nice."

It cracked her up, rolled her sideways with laughter. I just sat there and grinned amiably while she got herself under control.

"You are a delightfully refreshing man, Ashton," she said, still giggling.

"So are you, I replied. "I mean, delightfully refreshing scientist."

She moved a foot onto my, uh, lap and said, "Scientists can have fun, too, can't they?"

I replied, "Not if they're married to their Work," using the capital "W" form. But I placed a foot onto her, uh, lap, too, as I continued the thought. "Would that be considered extramarital or extrascientific?"

She wiggled a couple of well-positioned toes while thinking about that, then said, "I think it would be considered just plain human. Don't you?"

I told her, "Oh, yes—say, I'm all for being human."

"Me, too," she said, with a smile and another wiggle of the toes.

I wiggled back and said, "I think human is nice, very nice."

That brought a belly laugh that kicked my foot loose. I doggedly replaced it while she settled down again enough to ask, "Human what?"

I replied, very soberly, "Oh, human anything. Sex, for example. Human sex is very nice."

"As compared to what?" she wondered, giggling.

"Well, as compared, say, to dog sex. Dogs are very locked in, very rigid, pardon the expression. The canine glans penis swells with orgasm—and, uh, you know what happens then—it's a lock. Sex like that would be a rather humiliating situation for humans."

She appeared to be thinking about it, then: "I don't know, Ashton. Maybe not."

"Or take the feline penis."

"Gee. Think I should?"

"Oh no, definitely not. It's barbed, see, sort of like a harpoon. Not too bad on the downstroke but

definitely little joy the other way."

"Hmmm. Is that why my kitty carries on so when she's with her boyfriend?"

"Oh I'd say so, yes. See, human is much nicer. Bovine, now, bovine is really terrible. Talk about wham bam. One stroke, that's all, for a bull—just one gigantic lunge, and it's thank ya, ma'am."

"I don't think I'd like that."

"Course not. Uh..."

"What?"

"If you don't mind me saying it, you give great foot."

She giggled. "Thanks. So do you. Where'd you get so smart about sex?"

"Am I?"

"You sure are. I'd never heard any of that stuff before. Is it truer?"

I said, "Well, I've never done any direct research into it, but... I read it somewhere."

"Not at Annapolis, surely."

I said, "Possibly. You read a lot of shit at Annapolis, same as anywhere else."

"Did you learn to talk like that at Annapolis, too?"

"Talk like what?"

"You have a potty mouth."

"Oh. Sorry. I just do that when I'm nervous or upset."

"Are you nervous or upset now?"

I replied, "I think, uh, yes, I may be."

She did one of those nice laughs. "Please don't be. I promise that I will be very gentle."

I said, "Really? Oh. Well. Okay, then."

See? There are compensations. My life isn't all folly, you know.

Chapter Four: A Tilt With Candor

It turns out that the house was owned by Isaac Donaldson. He'd bought the land back in the forties when dirt was still as cheap as dirt, and built the house many years later from a lifetime accumulation of book royalties and other unneeded earnings. Ditto, with regard to the art collection, though a substantial number of the objects came as gifts from friends and "disciples" who knew of his passion for art and could not pass up a good buy on his behalf.

And I guess the guy had a bunch of admirers. According to Jennifer Harrel, the man was practically a saint. "There is no way," she told me, "to even begin to calculate the impact Isaac has had on the advancement of science. Not so much that he's such a great scientist, though he's certainly no slouch in that department, but because he is such a tremendous person. His influence on several generations of students and young scientists is simply incalculable."

Seems that he had a habit of taking on not only the educational thirsts of young aspirants but very often their physical sustenance, as well.

"He fed the multitudes," is the way Jen put it.

Jen, yeah. We had progressed way beyond the formalities of rank even before we quit the bubbly waters of the Jacuzzi. Have you ever made love with a total stranger and noticed how easily and quickly postures and pretenses evaporate between delightfully polarized bodies? It's true. Sexu-

intimacy is the quickest route to absolute honesty. We should all think about that, maybe, while we take another look at our social institutions and wonder if we've gone about things all wrong. Maybe our politicians and business leaders should shake cocks instead of hands—and, you know, just don't be intimidated by all the talk of latent homosexuality; let it all hang out for awhile and see where it takes us. You know, like, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Jones, and what great tits you've got"— "Thank you, Mr. Smith; while you were admiring my tits, I was noticing the exciting bulge in your pants."

That's honesty, see. Cuts through all the phoney baloney and puts human relationships on a candid footing, at least. A suffering world weeps for candor.

Anyway, yes, we had progressed to first names and total intimacy then on to pet names and intimate frenzy; after all that, what's a little candor? I told Jen the whole dissolute story of my life including the bit about being conceived on the backseat of an automobile—wherefrom came the "family name"—great-grandpappy was an admiral, you see, an Ashton of the South Carolina line; and "son of a gun" is an ancient naval term denoting illegitimate children conceived under the guns of the old sailing vessels in the days when women went down to the sea in ships as well as men, and, of course, things have always been the same between the sexes; there were a lot of sons of guns in those days. My own mother, never at a loss for wit, thought of me as a "son of the Ford" and that's the way it went on my birth certificate. Jen thought it a charming story and idly wondered how many sons of telescopes and Bunsen burners were being born in these days of sexual equality, then went total candid and related to me her "first orgasm with a man," experienced in the shadow of the 200-inch telescope at Mt. Palomar.

"Astronomy is primarily a nighttime science, you know," she added. "And the atmosphere for sexual seduction is just darned near-perfect."

So much, I was thinking, for hallowed halls, but not for long, because her little story, I guess stirred both of us again and we sort of abandoned everything else for another go at pure physical candor.

An hour or so later, while we lay in blissfully exhausted contemplation of the city lights spread before us like a lush carpet of sparkling jewels, Jen found the minimal articulation required to tell me about Mary Ann Cunningham. "There is a connection," she said in a whispery voice. "I didn't know her personally. Not sure I actually saw her, before today. But I knew that she came to Isaac about six months ago and told him she was dropping all her classes for awhile, maybe forever. She was pregnant. One of those chance encounter things, I take it; never saw the boy again, didn't even know his name. But she was pregnant. Couldn't face her parents with it. She was moving out of town somewhere up north—had a job offer, I think, intended to have the baby, maybe place it for adoption, maybe raise it herself—she would decide that later.

"Isaac was fit to be tied. Had her pegged as a sure winner in the golden science sweepstakes, terribly distraught about losing her to mere motherhood. 'Any woman can have a baby,' he fussed. 'Only a few can master universal dynamics.'

"Long and short of it, he talked her into an abortion, paid for it himself, got her the job at Griffith. That's the connection, and that's all the connection. I can't recall hearing him mention her name again. Don't believe I heard it from anyone until a couple of days ago, when I heard the news that the police were investigating her disappearance. I just thought, well, maybe she met another boy and Isaac's not around to help her, *this* time. Today was only the second time. I have visited Griffith myself since he's been gone. Went down there one day last month and searched his office for a clue, found nothing. No reason to go back, until today."

I asked, lazily, "You work at... ?"

"Sort of loosely, for Cal Tech—in research, not teaching, and—"

"What does that mean?—'sort of loosely'?"

"I'm called in on special projects. Usually at Palomar."

"That's way down toward San Diego."

"Yes. And I do consulting for JPL, and occasionally for Hughes."

"Hughes Laboratories?—up near Pepperdine Malibu?"

"Uh huh."

"Hush-hush stuff," I said.

"Yes."

"What exactly is your field?"

"Creation physics."

"You don't mean, uh..."

She giggled deliciously. "Not that kind of creation, no. I am trying to determine the nature of the universe before the big bang."

I was impressed, and I said so. "Nice work, very nice."

She punched me lightly in the belly and said, "I'll tell you a big secret one day if you'll stay nice, very nice."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Because first I have to find out how very nice you can really be."

She was not kidding, either. The candor was gone, the fun was gone, and Doctor Universe was again in the saddle. The mood was not exactly brooding—but it was certainly sober and darkly contemplative.

"Thank you for today," she said, very quietly. "I don't get many of these."

The way she said it made me think of "folly" and the human need for same. So maybe I'd had the privilege to serve as Doctor Universe's folly for the day. Which is okay enough. I'd had my tilt with total candor, too, and that was okay enough for its own sake alone.

But I found myself hoping that I would qualify, one day soon, for the beautiful doctor's "big secret."

I could not help wondering, too, if saintly Isaac Donaldson had a secret folly somewhere which right then could be eating him alive. Or eating his corpse. And I decided that I would not rest this case until all the secrets had stepped forward and identified themselves...in perfect candor.

I rolled off the playing field and made my way a bit unsteadily toward the shower. Night had fallen completely and enshrouded this house on the mountain, but the glow of city lights far below and far away had found a stopping place within the window bay of the bedroom of the House of Isaac. I paused at the bathroom door and turned back to see what Dr. Jen was up to. She was softly illuminated in the glow from the window, totally absorbed with something within her own mind and totally oblivious to the lights of man.

It struck me, then, that she had not told me anything at all about her own relationship with the owner of the manse or how it worked out that she now lived there as the obvious mistress of the manse.

Do saints have mistresses?

I decided that it was none of my business and none of my concern, not even in total candor.

Chapter Five: Players

I stopped at the first pay phone along the return route and bought a call to Souza's twenty-four hour number. I figured it was time for all the players to stand up and identify themselves, and he was first on my list. What I got, though, was Souza's "anchor," a 22-year-old named Foster Scott who wanted desperately to be a detective someday but probably never would if he stuck with the Souza Bureau of Private Investigation. Souza knows a good thing when he sees it and he knew he had the perfect anchorman in Foster Scott.

"Put Greg on, Foster," I growled.

I did not bother to identify myself because this kid never forgets a voice; furthermore, he never takes notes but can deliver verbatim an entire daylong list of messages. So I knew something was up when he failed to "recognize" me, coming back instead with a very formal, "Sorry, sir, he's mobile. But if it's important, please hang up and call right back and I'll put you on the automatic forward."

I hung up without another word, punched the number again, and this time got my man.

"I was hoping you'd call," he said, and the tone—even

considering the source—raised my hackles just a mite. "We're on radio relay so keep that in mind. What'd you get from the girl?"

Leave it to Souza to refer to a Ph.D. in creation physics as "the girl," for God's sake.

I replied, "First you tell me, pal."

"Tell you what?"

"Exactly what is going down here. Precisely who is paying your freight. Approximately what are you expecting from me."

"Can't go into that right here, old buddy."

"Then stop the goddamned car at the nearest phone booth and call me back. I'll give you the number."

"Don't know if I should do that. Think something is at my tailgate. Uh, well, maybe I better though. We really do need to talk."

I gave him the number and had to repeat it twice. Damned guy was probably speeding along freeway somewhere, trying to look forward and backward at the same time while also jotting telephone number. I could picture it in my mind, and had to wonder if Ma Bell had finally reached so far in the effort to bring the world a little closer.

But I got the callback in about two minutes, and now the paranoia was unrestrained. "Listen, As let's make this quick. If these guys are at state of the art, then you know as well as I do that they could have been scanning for my voiceprint and locked me in on the 'hello.' Don't go—"

"Wait, wait," I interrupted. "Which guys are these?"

"Beats hell out of me. They barged in on Foster 'bout an hour ago, flashed ID's at him. All he could make out were the screamin' eagles of some federal agency, but he says they didn't look, FBI. Foster thinks the office is under surveillance right now, and so do I. I was up your way. So don't go home."

He could be the most exasperating son of a...

"Tell me about it, Greg."

"Well, you know me. Once I've seen a face, I've got it locked. Right?"

I sighed and bowed to the inevitable drama. "Right, Greg, right. You have an unbelievable mind. Amen."

"Well, I saw Hank Gavinsky tonight. Remember him?"

I did not.

"Remember?—the NSC case."

I said, "Right" just to keep him moving; didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"Word got out just after that, maybe old Hank was doubling on us. And he flat dropped out of sight. I saw Jimmy Casaba last year during that thing with Guatemala. He told me Hank was tripling as a double cover, and he's really a CIA hitman, now."

I said, "Greg, for God's sake...will you just tell me—I thought we needed to make this quick."

"Right, I'm making it as quick as I can." But the tension was building in that voice and it was even starting to infect me. "I told you I saw Hank tonight. I was out your way when Foster alerted me. Souza dropped through your neighborhood, figured it was better than risking the telephones. Know where I saw Hank? Just off your driveway, pal, just parked and waiting. Don't go home tonight, Ash. Smeared mud on your license plates and check into a hotel under an assumed name until I get this thing straightened out. Someone has made a terrible mistake."

I lit a cigarette, took a harsh pull at it, had to resist a very strong impulse to look over my shoulder.

Meanwhile, Souza was saying, "I know this all started with the damned TV crew."

"What damned TV crew is that, Greg?" I inquired with resignation, I know, clearly apparent in my voice.

"Out there this morning, you know, at the murder scene. That bastard got me on his Minicam, I know he did, and he probably got all of us. I saw him inside talking to the employees after you guys left, and I overheard some talk about our missing VIP. Listen, that stuff is supposed to be under the lid. It's no wonder it's blown all to hell now. The early evening news starts at four-thirty in this area. Those bastards were at my office by five-thirty."

I said, wearily, "Greg, please—what the hell are we into?"

"Not sure, old buddy, but it's plenty ripe, I can tell you that. I finally got a line on my mysterious retainer after peeling off three layers of cover. Know who we're working for?"

I said, "I can hardly wait to be told that, Greg, believe me.

"We're working for the fuckin' Russians, I think."

I said, "Oh God," and meant it as a prayer.

"That's not for sure, yet, so don't get totally unhinged. But watch your ass while I get it all straightened out. And maybe you better warn the girl."

That time I did look over my shoulder. I said, "You think...?"

"Sure, it's possible. Maybe you should put her in a hotel, too. But for God's sake, don't go to the cops with this, don't go to anyone, don't trust anyone, I think we're into some deep shit here. Uh, listen, Ash...just in case...I mean, anything could happen. Right? I already gave this to Foster, just in case. Eye on the sky. Okay? Remember, eye on the sky. Now get lost."

The receiver was buzzing in my ear. I hung it up, went straight to the Maserati, turned her around and blasted off for Verdugo Mountain. I was less than five minutes from her front door, so she'd been alone for no more than ten to twelve minutes and, besides, I had not fully bought Greg Souza's who's your bag—but this guy was no dummy—a pain in the ass, maybe, but no dummy—so I had a very mixed bag of churning guts just barely under the control of a skeptical mind—not so much under control to prevent me from liberating a Walther PPK from a trick compartment under the carpet at my feet. The long and the short of it is that I got back to the House of Isaac in three minutes flat. The hot and the cold of it is that the electronic gate was standing wide open, whereas it had closed and locked behind me just minutes earlier. A dark sedan was parked behind Jen's Jaguar in the alcove; I caught that in my peripheral vision as I stood the Maserati on her nose and bailed out running.

A skinny guy in a business suit lunged out of the sedan and rushed me. I took the angular momentum of that rush off the left hip and spun him on across the driveway and into the iron fence. I paused briefly at the open doorway for a quick sniff of the inside atmosphere and threw a quick look over my shoulder to make sure the guy was not up and rushing again; he was not; I palmed the Walther and pushed on inside, all the guts at full wriggle now and prepared for most anything.

Greg Souza did not come by his paranoia cheaply. Let me get this explanation into the record, right here. The guy earned his spurs in the craziest of all the crazy worlds possible. The international "intelligence" community has had its good press and bad; it has been idealized, crucified, and lampooned in every media form for many years now, and the paranoid agent who sees a conspiracy every bush is probably the most hackneyed buffoon to ever grace a television screen. I poke fun at Souza myself, even though I know with the certainty of one who has been there himself that the guys do not get that way innocently. They do live in an insane world where there is no principle or ethic and no morality larger than the mission itself. It is a world in which success is always right and failure always wrong, and there is no price that will not be paid for success.

Which is mainly why I got the hell out.

And which was why, at that moment in the House of Isaac, my guts were fairly screaming with concern for Dr. Jen.

Nor were they screaming for nothing.

This very bland-faced, pleasant looking man was on both knees beside the Jacuzzi, Jennifer was in the Jacuzzi, totally submerged, and the guy was holding her under.

He noticed my presence there just maybe a single heartbeat before I took his head in both of my hands and threw it across the wet bar. The body followed, but not exactly in a proper arc.

I did not even look for the touchdown but had the spluttering, bug-eyed beauty in my arms and hauling even before the crash beyond the bar. She was okay; a little the worse for wear but alive and well enough, which maybe was more than could be said a few minutes hence if we had hung around to discuss the matter. I wrapped her in a towel and carried her out of there, carefully placed her inside the Maserati, and away we went without a backward glance.

I thought I caught a glint of light reflecting from a metallic surface near some trees just below the drive as we flashed past that point but I was not positive I had seen anything at all, and it was no time for idle curiosity—nor was it necessary, with the Maserati beneath us. She lifted us up, up, and away—and I knew damned well that nothing on wheels behind us would so much as taste our dust until we was ready for that.

We hit the Foothill Freeway at full scream and I did not throttle-back until I'd worked us through the briskly running traffic pack and had them all numbered in my rearview.

Dr. Jen had spoken not a word and I'd had little opportunity to do more than toss her an occasional reassuring smile until that moment. But then I lit a cigarette and offered it to her. To my surprise, she accepted it and took a businesslike pull at it. So I lit another for myself and tried to wind the guts back into place.

"You okay?" I quietly inquired.

"Does mad as hell qualify?" she replied, just as quietly.

I chuckled and said, "I'd be mad, too. You looked like hell, kiddo. Snot coming out your nose, eyes all bugged and terrified. Can't you find a better way to get your kicks?"

She asked, "Did you kill him?"

I shrugged as I replied, "Unless I've lost my touch."

"How does that make you feel?"

I shrugged again. "It was his nickel. How does it make you feel?"

She did not reply to that but told me, "Ash, I'm really scared."

"We're okay for now," I assured her.

"I don't mean—I mean... Isaac. That man was looking for Isaac."

"He seemed pretty busy with you," I commented.

"He was trying to get me to tell him where Isaac is. I kept telling him I didn't know. And he kept pushing me back under. Why in the world would a man like that be looking for...?" She made a lunging motion for me and held on for dear life. "My God but you were a beautiful sight to terrified eyes! Thank you, Ash. I don't know how to... just thanks, thanks."

I asked, very quietly, "Where is Isaac, Jen?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

I said, "I believe that you do."

"No. Please. I just don't know."

But she did. She knew.

Chapter Six: The Lock

I moved from the Foothill to the Simi Valley Freeway and ran on west to Topanga Canyon then took that surface route south for roughly twenty miles to the coast, which put me down about halfway between Santa Monica and Malibu. If you are unfamiliar with the area, Topanga Canyon all the way through the Santa Monica Mountains is a tortuous course and heavily traveled, so the going was relatively slow and it was nearing eight o'clock when we hit the coast highway. Throughout that ten-hour journey, however, we had traveled in silence, with not so much as a word between us. Which gave me a lot of thinking time, and I certainly needed that. Jen needed it too, apparently—curled up beside me wearing only a damp towel, hair wetly tousled, brooding.

As we turned again westbound along the coast, she very quietly bent the silence with an almost musing observation. "What am I going to do, Ash? I'm naked. Don't even have a hairbrush, toothbrush—nothing. I can't run around in this condition."

"The operative idea there," I suggested, "is 'run around.' You can do that. Be thankful. The other stuff is mere process. I'll run in up here someplace and get you something to wear, cosmetic whatever you need. Pad and pencil right in front of you. Make a list. Sizes, too, please."

She gave me a long, searching look, then sighed and went to work on her list of needs. That lasted for about twenty seconds. Then, with pencil poised above the pad and her attention apparently pointed that way, she softly inquired, "Does it bother you? That you have killed that man?"

"Maybe two of them," I corrected her, in about the same tone. "But I thought we already covered that."

She said, "No. You just shrugged it off."

I told her, "I hit a deer once. With a car. Bounded out of the darkness and froze in my headlights not ten feet in front of me. Didn't even have time to move my foot off the accelerator before the impact. It bothered me. Yeah, it bothered me."

"Is that an allegory?"

I tossed her a smile and said, "I guess. Some things are simply unavoidable. You regret it. But you

can't take it back. And there's no sense in wearing a hair shirt all your life because of it."

"But it does bother you," she decided quietly.

"If I think about it. Sure. It bothers me. Every death bothers me. It always seems wrong. Yet know..."

"You and Isaac would, I believe, speak the same language."

"Glad to hear that."

"Yes. He says that death is implicit in birth, yet it always comes as a surprise; it is always resisted, always resented, and always improper..."

I finished the quotation, for her. "There is no such thing as a proper death."

She gave me a delighted smile. "You have read him."

I replied, "It has been a long time. But he keeps coming back, little by little."

Dr. Jen seemed pleased as punch about that.

I told her, "Better finish your list. Shopping center just ahead."

But her needs were simple. A few basic cosmetic items, comb and brush, sandals, jeans, pair of panties and a bra, blouse. I knew a small boutique just a few minutes from my place where all of that could be had. Took me just a couple of minutes to round it all up, then I added a small overnight bag and a simple purse to the list and used the telephone while the clerk wrote it up. Just wanted to see if anyone was home at my place. I let it ring about six times, hung up, paid for the purchase, and told the clerk a bald-faced lie. "Someone stole my friend's clothes out of the car while we were on the beach," I explained. "She's out there in the car, right now, shivering in a damp towel. Could she use your dressing room to...?"

Why of course, certainly, no problem.

I left the purchase on the counter while I returned to the Maserati and told Jen, "Someone stole your clothes at the beach. There's a dressing room inside. You're welcome to use it. The stuff is paid for. Take your time. I need to check something out. Be back in ten minutes; promise."

She seemed a bit doubtful about the whole thing but gathered the towel around her, slid out of the car, and walked with surprising dignity in bare feet and towel to the shop. I escorted her to the door, kissed her forehead, and repeated, "Ten minutes."

The returning smile was a bit uncertain but she went on inside. I was in the Maserati and out there while the clerk was showing her to the dressing room. I had no memory whatever of any "Harold Gavinsky" but I wanted to see the guy for myself if indeed he did exist and if indeed he was waiting to "see" me.

He did, and he was—well, sort of. And, yes, I recognized that face when I saw it—though probably I would not have if we had merely bumped into each other on the street. I had left the Maserati a block back and came up on his blind side by foot. The car displayed a rental company decal and was parked some fifty feet off my driveway; the window on the driver's side was down and the radio was playing soft music with the sound of KBIG, a popular "easy listening" L.A. station; the guy looked half asleep.

I slid the Walther around the doorpost and nuzzled it into his ear as I said, softly, "Bang—you're dead."

He sure was. Already. Throat cut, ear to ear. And not too long ago. Whoever did it was either as quiet as a cat or was able to approach as a friend: a blood-soaked sniper's pistol equipped with silencer and scope lay in his lap; death had indeed come, here, as a total surprise.

So much for my hastily conceived plan of action, concocted during the journey through Topanga Canyon. I had hoped to have a bit of gentle conversation with this guy—a very candid conversation, gunpoint—which could get directly into the heart of whichever "misunderstanding" had sent him

my door. The only thing left of that idea now was to elicit as much information as possible from the corpse. But it was such a messy one, and I did not want this guy's blood on my hands or any blood fingerprints anywhere. I did manage to get the coat open and to extract a slim wallet from an inside pocket without violating the scene in any visible way. But I learned little from the wallet, except that Gavinsky was traveling under the identity of Walter Simonds. He carried a Maryland driver's license and a couple of credit cards under that name. Except for several large bills, there was nothing else. I replaced the wallet in the inside coat-pocket, then went to the other side of the car for a look at the glove compartment. Car rental papers in there were under the same name. The car had been rented at Los Angeles International Airport. An area map, supplied by the rental agency, had been marked with a highlighting pen to show the route from LAX to Malibu. The car had been checked out at seven twenty that morning. That did not compute. Why had Gavinsky marked a route from LAX to Malibu even before I was into the case? And, if his visit had nothing to do with the case of the missing scientist, then what was it concerned with? Why had he been sitting there just outside my door all day with a sniper's piece in his lap? Obviously the guy had been dispatched to dispatch me. But, for God's sake, why?

Ignorance can be bliss, yes. This guy had missed me by just a few minutes, probably. I had left home at about a quarter after eight, for the meeting with Souza. Gavinsky could have arrived on the scene by eight-thirty, easy, a paid assassin, settling into the wait for his pigeon with a scope and a silencer. If I had gone straight home from Griffith, I would have walked blissfully ignorant into a simple hit. But who wanted me hit? And why? On the other hand, who had hit the hitter? And why? Surely not... No. This was not Greg Souza's style. If he had wanted the guy out of the picture, and if he could get close enough to slit his throat, then he would have chloroformed him or hit him with some exotic state-of-the-art chemical, driven him up into the hills somewhere, torched the car and shoved it over the side. I'm not saying that Greg would do something like that, but that's the way he *would* do it. Greg went to the same schools that I went to.

I did some housekeeping around the scene just to make sure there was nothing of me left behind, then I got the hell away from there and took the beach way into my place, threw some things in a bag and got the hell out.

My hands were shaking so I had a problem unlocking the Maserati. I fired her up and did a quick quiet U-turn, went on down for a few blocks, pulled over to the curb and did a quick fix on my nervous system—chemicals, yes, but from the right brain, not from any streetcorner physician. Took about forty seconds to get the rhythms into a strong alpha pattern; another twenty seconds with that focus got rid of my shakes but I came out of that feeling very agitated and disturbed about Jennifer Harrow. Nothing specific, just a hazy sort of apprehension.

I had been gone for about fifteen minutes when I nosed the Maserati into the small shopping center; for some reason, feeling more like Greg Souza every second, I did a quick recon of the parking lot, checking out the dozen or so cars that were parked there before I pulled up in front of the boutique. A couple of browsers were inside, both women, but no sign of Jennifer.

I went in, caught the clerk's attention and jerked a thumb toward the dressing room. "She still there?"

The clerk replied, "Why, no, she left quite awhile ago."

I observed, with some irritation, "I've only been gone fifteen minutes."

The woman told me, "Well I'm sorry. She wasn't here more than five."

I said, "Look, this is serious. The lady may be suffering a bit of shock. Did she go out of here on her own steam?"

"I certainly did not kick her out, if that's what you mean," she replied huffily. "After all..."

I said, "No no, I'm not implying—I'm just worried about her. Did she leave here by herself?"

But I was already on this lady's list. She said, icily, "I have more to do than try to keep track of quarreling lovers. Stolen clothes, indeed."

So much for that. A small diner and a bar were the only other businesses still open in that center. I checked them both; negative. Then I saw the phone booth, out near the street, and felt drawn to it. She'd been there, in there, yes. No visible evidence, but the traces she'd left behind for me were palpable as a perfumed scent. As I stood there, my hand on that telephone, one of the things did not go and I knew I had a lock on her. It was not a voice or a vision or anything like that; I just "knew" when she'd gone, and I knew why, as though suddenly remembering something that I had done myself.

She had called "Jack," at the Hughes Laboratories, and asked to borrow a car. She had done that during a mental frenzy approaching full panic, and the subject of that panic was Isaac Donaldson. Then she had paced around that phone booth for several minutes, agitation growing, eyes flaring to identify each vehicle that turned into the shopping center. That was all I had. It was enough.

I returned to the Maserati and sent her back up the coast highway, across Malibu Creek and up the hill inland past the Pepperdine campus. The controlled-access drive leading into the Hughes complex was, yes, just a three-minute trip. Plenty enough time to dispatch a car down the hill and beat me to the shopping center. I wondered, then, however idly, if that had been about the time I was playing with my alphas.

I was parked in the shadows just below the Hughes entrance when the small silver sedan made its cautious exit and poised there for a moment before turning out onto the northbound lane. I could not see the occupant of that car but I knew that it was her. I had a lock, so I did not even have to follow her closely.

She was heading north along Malibu Canyon Road, streaking toward the Ventura Freeway, no doubt. She would not go west from there. She would go east. I knew it, could almost feel the message spreading through her mind.

Jennifer was going to Isaac.

And so, about damn time, was I.

Chapter Seven: Eyes Up

I was running about a half-mile off Jennifer's rear bumper, surging closer for visual contact at each freeway interchange just for damn sure, as we crossed the entire Los Angeles basin from northwest to southeast—and that is a hell of a run. The Ventura Freeway merged into the Foothill at Pasadena, then one into the Corona Freeway near Pomona, streaking south by southeast from that point on Interstate 15 to join I-15E at Murietta Hot Springs—and, by now, we are rolling due south through minimal populated countryside, dairy farms and horse ranches, climbing into a high valley with the Santa Ana Mountains to the west and the San Jacinto range east—an area of beautifully sculptured "mashed potato" hillocks scattered about at random, formed as a high desert in some dim geological era but now responding to the stubborn hand of man to yield square mile upon square mile of citrus and avocado, a lush agricultural bounty which reminded me that fanning remains California's number one industry.

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