

= PART I =

Chapter 1

A perfect morning in a city of perfect mornings, an artist would have worked, a god would have rested.

The convertible slowed as it approached the stables, then bounced from the road onto a gravel driveway. Its headlights swung left-to-right, acute angles filling with dust, while gravel popped under the tires like grease in a skillet.

The driver, by nature an early riser, had not been fully awake until moments before when a fawn wandered onto the road ahead of him. He had jerked the wheel and watched in panic as the animal froze, stiffened on bony legs, and turned its wide black eyes to the headlights. The hood of the car flashed by and blotted the fawn from sight, but no impact. In the rearview mirror the driver watched it flicker into the scrub oak near the road, legs, ears, a tail. A thirsty search in a parched summer, he thought. If adrenaline were coffee, he just got a potful. His name was Tom Shephard, his rank was detective, and he was the new and sole member of the Laguna Beach Police Homicide Division.

Shephard followed the wide driveway past a corral, turning off the headlights and engine when three figures coalesced before him in the grainy, salt-and-pepper light of morning. To the east an orange glow preceded the sun, to the west the black sky was already softening to gray. It would be a while before the sun mounted the highest hill and announced itself to the city, nestled and still sleeping against the Pacific.

He pulled the Mustang under a stand of eucalyptus. The scrubbed, high-pitched aroma of the trees engulfed him as he stepped out and shut the door, his legs still shaky from the near crash with the fawn. A comet-shaped leaf spiraled into his trunk as he searched for his flashlight, which he located in a box of rags and car wax. He tested it, pleased that the batteries were still strong. When he closed the trunk a mockingbird began its morning chatter, which followed him up the driveway to the three figures that stood, heads bowed, flashlights aimed in front of them.

On the ground was a hump, and over the hump was a blanket. Shephard recognized his fellow police by their outlines: to the right protruded the telltale belly of Sergeant Grimes; to the left slouched the almost shoulderless frame of Carl Pavlik, the crime scene investigator; between them, her stocky curves undaunted by patrol garb, stood Lydia Worth, farthest from the blanket and first to speak.

„I found him here in the driveway when I turned out to head back to town,“ she said. „The door of the house was open.“ She raised her flashlight beam, which crossed weakly to the house and shivered around the open door. „I don't know if it's Tim or not. But this is his house and stable.“

Shephard knelt down and turned back the blanket. He had seen the mask of death in so many expressions, so many forms. A hundred faces, a hundred deaths, a hundred chances to ready one's self for the next. But even a thousand wouldn't have prepared him for this. His knees weakened as he dropped the blanket and stood up.

„What d'ya think of that, Wonderboy? Your first murder in Laguna. Style, drama, the creeps. We didn't want you coming down from L.A. and thinking this was just a quiet little town.“ Grimes flashed his light onto Shephard's face. Shephard took it, turned it off, and handed it back.

„Lydia, is this where you usually make your turnaround?“ Shephard's voice sounded foreign and disembodied, even to himself.

„Not until last week. I saw Tim downtown and he asked me to make a pass once a night. Before that I was using the road half a mile back.“ Even with the burnishing tones of sunrise playing against one side of her face, Shephard could see that Lydia Worth looked pale, stricken.

„Why the pass?“ he asked. The headlights would strafe the house and the car could spook the horses. Horses, he thought. He hadn't seen any. For a moment he gazed at the skeleton of the empty corral.

„He was worried about prowlers.“

„Rope off the driveway where it meets the road, please. Both places. Grimes, help her.“ Shephard's voice took a decided pleasure in the order to Grimes, who didn't budge.

„Think your big-city smarts can cut this one, Shephard?“

„With people like you helping, we can't lose, Jerry.“

Grimes disgorged a grunt, which was immediately drowned by a phlegmy smoker's cough. Shephard offered him a cigarette but Grimes aimed his stomach toward the road and spit.

„People like me don't shoot kids,“ he said.

Shephard absorbed the insult without comment. He looked down to the blanket and lit the cigarette, believing that smoke might keep away the germs of death, just as it keeps away plague or mosquitoes. At any rate it was a conscience-easer, and better than no breakfast at all. The smoke rushed to his head and mixed with the smell of eucalyptus, which made it almost pleasurable. Beside him, the crime scene investigator unwrapped a piece of purple aromatic gum and placed it in his mouth. Grape, a Pavlik staple. He pocketed the paper neatly.

„Carl, buddy. Happy August twenty-fifth,“ Shephard said.

„Morning, Tom. Yesterday my horoscope said question marks are on the horizon. Look at all of them.“ Pavlik pushed back his glasses with a thin finger. He was a slight man with straight black hair and the perpetual look of someone who has just got out of bed. Only his eyes were free of the general sense of dilapidation; they studied Shephard's face, then returned to the ground in front of them.

„Let's see what we can answer.“ Shephard pulled back the blanket and looked again at the black and blistered face, scorched hairless and still oozing fluid,

cheeks and throat distended like a bullfrog in mid-croak. Protruding from the forehead was a blackened rock. Then he noticed the odor, localized but distinct. Burned flesh, he thought, sweet and repellent. He pulled away the blanket. The body was an obscene extension of the face: chest a swollen quilt of blisters, stomach and genitals overrun with blebs, legs and arms an edematous outbreak. The only evidence of clothing lay in the burnt fray of material around the body perimeter and the twisted leather belt still fastened at the waist. The buckle, large and ovaloid, had sunk into the flesh. Only the bottoms of his bare feet had been spared.

Shephard realized that he was scarcely breathing. He stood up, exhaled, took another drag on the cigarette. Slanting vertigo, a queasy slosh in the stomach. He watched Lydia Worth drag a pylon from the trunk of her patrol car while Grimes waited. „Shoot it, Carlos,“ he said.

Pavlik already had the camera out. He fastened the strobe, set the meters, and began. The strobe blinked efficiently, the body seeming to shift positions between each shot. Shephard turned away and looked up at the sun, now bisected by the hill in front of it. He noted that the mockingbird was still singing happily, immune to what was revealed below. Pavlik ran through the roll of thirty-six almost without stopping. Shephard waved the camera away and bent back down.

He worked carefully but quickly, tilting back the head, prying open the mouth and easing two fingers inside. Out came a wad of dry paper, green and white. Then another, and another. Six in all, with more beyond reach in the throat. Pavlik held out a plastic bag and Shephard dropped them in, saving the last. The wad was the size of a golf ball but much lighter. He stood up and unraveled it beneath the intent, bespectacled stare of Pavlik.

Bills. Two hundreds, two fifties, two twenties.

„Three hundred and forty dollars,“ said Pavlik, a detail man. Shephard worked his fingers across the bills, locating in his flashlight beam the red and blue hairs, then dropped them into the bag. The crime scene investigator snapped it closed, as if the money might attempt an escape. Shephard looked down again.

Mouth agape, rock protruding from the forehead like a rapacious tumor, the face defied long observation. Shephard looked instead at his watch. A mile to the west he heard waves breaking on Main Beach, or perhaps the swooshing of cars on Coast Highway. The early morning air tasted good. The man was sprawled, legs and arms out, as if he had been dropped from above. Shephard followed an imaginary line from the sky to the body, his eyes at first refreshed by the slate gray clouds, then accosted again by the ugliness on the earth in front of him. The left hand lay open and relaxed, the right was clenched tightly, even in death. Shephard coaxed open the fist as Pavlik slid a sheet of clean white paper underneath. From the still-white palm tumbled a meager handful of hair, which Pavlik immediately bagged.

„Nice,“ he said.

„Stupendous,“ Shephard agreed, unfolding the blanket to cover the body. Pavlik reached out and claimed a burnt match from the ground not far from the dead man's head.

For a brief moment, the two men lost themselves in the search for more matches, a welcome relief from the close-up study of the dead. Finding none, they

rose without speaking and followed the footprints toward the house. The prints were deeper and more clearly marked in the soft clay near the porch. Bending down with his flashlight, Shephard saw that one set had been made by bare feet and began not far from the porch steps—the distance of a running jump, he guessed—and continued in a staggering, disordered pattern. They ended at the body. Another set bore the signs of cowboy boots, deep heel, wide ball, and scant toe. The right heel was cloven sharply by a V-shaped divot in the back. These followed the bare feet halfway to the body, then veered into the gravel and reappeared in the soil, facing—not pursuing—the dead man's. Shephard noted other tracks, older and trampled over by the boots and naked feet.

„Shoot the fresh prints, Carl. Then rope them off. Get a good close-up of the right boot.“

„Why did he run all the way around to get Tim from the front?“ Pavlik asked gloomily.

He was right, Shephard thought. Tim, if it was Tim, had apparently run into, rather than away from, the person who had killed him. Unless the poor wretch had run all the way from the porch with a rock dividing his head. „It must have been easy,“ he said, pointing to the chaotic pattern of the dead man's prints. „He wasn't breaking any speed records.“

Shephard went through the open front door and into a well-ordered, cowboyish living room. The lights were on. A pair of Winchester lever-action rifles were crisscrossed over a brick fireplace, a Navajo rug lay centered on the wooden floor, the window curtains were plaid, the coffee table solid oak. One wood-paneled wall was generously graced with photographs and paintings of horses. The other was covered in shelves for books, plants, a small television set. A tall but neat stack of *Racing Form* newspapers rose not far from the fireplace. More lay scattered on the coffee table in front of the leather couch. Shephard checked the dates: July 21 and 28, August 4 and 11. Horse man, horse race fan, he thought. Why the empty corral?

Also on the table were two shot glasses and a half-full bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey. Leaning forward, he noted that both glasses smelled of alcohol. Lights on and drinks poured. An early morning drink with a friend?

Open and face down on the floor near the coffee table lay a Bible. Shephard lifted it with his fingertips and set it down on the couch. The book was worn but serviceable, the gold letters of *Holy Bible* worn away from the leather cover, the binding battered but the pages intact. The first page offered a fancy filigreed frame and the words „Presented To,“ followed by three blank lines. The smeared black ink of a sloppily imprinted stamp read:

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FO TAT I N

The title page that came next had a colorplate called „Jesus and the Children“. Printed in bright red ink under the words Holy Bible was a concise and neatly lettered message:

Liars Burn and Little Liars
Burn First

Shephard felt a faint, sideways flutter in his chest as he read the note again. Then the room darkened.

Pavlik stood in the doorway, his rumpled form outlined in fresh sunlight, the ever-present forensic case dangling from one hand. He set it down with a thud on the hardwood floor. „Robbins’s people will be here in twenty minutes to get the body. Want to help me dust?“

„Do what you do best, Carl. I’m going to have a look at the house. Dust the book on the couch first. If there aren’t any prints, I’ll take it with me.“

„Grimes get to you? He hates new-hires. It’s a way of being colorful.“

„You got it, Carl, buddy. A colorful individual.“

„He’ll loosen up. He doesn’t have any idea what it’s like in the City of Angels. I do, and I never want to go back.“ Pavlik blew a purple bubble and sucked it back in.

Neither will I, Shephard thought as he walked down a short hallway that led out of the living room. A full-length mirror at the far end threw back his reflection. He stopped a moment to look at himself, a habit that was less vanity than curiosity: *Who am I?* Every mirror seemed to offer a different story. Only the fundamentals remained the same, a tall and meatless body, straight shoulders, brown hair that a TV commercial would have dismissed as unmanageable, a face of harsh angles softened only by the drowsy mustache that was so well integrated with the rest of his face he might have been born with it. Beyond that, the mirrors disagreed. Some emphasized the bags under the eyes, an image of weariness. Others suggested a stark, almost monotonous intensity. Still others shaded, altered, colored, rearranged him as if by whim.

The first room off the hallway was a den. It was arranged with a passion for symmetry: the bed centered and flanked by identical nightstands with identical lamps, a poster of a galloping horse framed in the middle of one wall, smaller pictures facing each other from opposite ends of the bed, same horse, same picture. Nothing in the room, he noted, suggested a woman’s presence. It was fanatically clean, fanatically un-lived in. Shephard recognized the bachelor’s dependence on order.

The large bedroom at the end of the hall was similar in spirit. On the nightstand stood two pictures, one of a man and a woman, one of the same man and woman with a small girl between them. The room was distinctly cool. The bed was made. An early morning drink with a friend he was expecting? Or was he used to rising long before sunrise and making the bed?

In the living room, Pavlik was on hands and knees, his face point-blank to a shot glass. One hand dusted the glass gently with a small brush, working white powder concentrically outward in short strokes. The other held a black sheet of construction paper behind the glass. Both were gloved in translucent white rubber, which Shephard noticed was approximately the pallor of Carl’s face. Pavlik pulled back and exhaled, chewing the gum with vigor. „Fair,“ he said. „Nothing on the book. Leather’s too old and porous. Interesting note on the title page, though.“

Shephard slipped the book into his coat pocket and stepped outside. The morning was already growing warm, and the northbound work traffic on Laguna Canyon Road had thickened. He watched the coroner's van lumber to a stop behind Lydia Worth's patrol car, against which Grimes leaned, smoking a cigar. Grimes blew a blue haze as Shephard approached. Before it cleared, two more patrol cars crunched onto the driveway, followed by the white Chevy four-door of the department's publicity officer. The Chevy skidded to a stop and Pincus of Public Relations got out, late but officious. Shephard confronted Grimes's puffy, bulldoggish face.

„Grimes, take the houses to the west. Lydia, you take the ones east. Wake up the neighbors and find out if they saw or heard anything.“

Grimes grunted and pushed off the car. Lydia accepted a cigarette from Shephard and lit it with a still-shaking hand. „I'm not used to this.“ She smiled weakly. „I talked to Tim Algernon five days ago, and now I can't be sure that's even him. If it is Tim, I can tell you he lived alone and has a daughter in town. Jane. He's owned the stables for a long time. He'd rent the horses for rides in the hills. Last week he told me he'd finally retired and sold off all the horses except one. A favorite mare.“

At the far end of the driveway, the exit end for cars leaving the stables, Shephard looked for fresh tire tracks. But the gravel was well-worn, and the faint signs of travel could have been a week old or an hour new.

Outside the barn, the nicked boot again. One set of prints going into the open barn door, the same set coming back out. Shephard stepped inside. A light bulb burned overhead, halfway down the double row of stalls. The musty smell of hay and dung lingered, ingrained by now, he thought, into the wood itself. The silence inside was broken only by the muted hiss of cars heading out Laguna Canyon Road. He noted that the nameplates on the stall doors had been recently removed. Fresher paint was underneath, and screw holes were torn in the wood. Severing his sentimental attachments, Shephard thought. Like when he had taken down the pictures of Louise after their divorce. Only the nameplate on the first stall remained: BECKY. The favorite mare, no doubt.

Shephard discovered that the tack wall was empty. A complete sale, he thought. But wouldn't he have saved a saddle, bit, and harness for Becky? He found no riding gear anywhere in the barn.

Back outside, the fresh morning sun made his eyes ache. Paralleling more bootprints toward the corral, Shephard stopped at a patch of moist clay under a pepper tree and found what he was looking for. The right footprint bore the nicked heel.

He returned to the body and stood over it, sensing the almost tangible aura that separates the dead from the living. He felt clumsy and out of place, like a tourist in a country where his customs and language don't apply.

From where he stood, Shephard could see the bootprints from the barn leading toward the corral. They ended at the now-open gate, obliterated by the deeper prints of hooves. Becky, he thought, a retired cowboy's pension. The animal had taken a wide circle around the dead man—spooked by the flames, Shephard assumed—then angled off toward an embankment behind the house. Her hooves had cut deep into the bank, then down to a wide stream bottom where the dry

weeks of summer had reduced the water to a brackish slick. With the sun working steadily on his neck and mosquitoes whining in his ears, Shephard followed the tracks until they climbed up the opposite bank, continued west, and disappeared into a stand of scrub oak.

Not twenty yards away stood the saddled horse, idly eyeing the detective.

Beyond the oak lay a dense grove of eucalyptus. And beyond the eucalyptus, a ten-minute ride across the dry hills, lay the city.

Chapter 2

The Orange County Coroner's facility is housed in a drab square building in Santa Ana, the only pretense at cheer being an orange band of paint that winds around it like a gift-box ribbon. The deputy medical examiner introduced himself as Glen Yee, then led Shephard down a clinical hallway toward a set of recessed double doors.

„Shephard, from Los Angeles?“ he asked casually. Yee was short, primly dressed, and vaguely oriental.

„Right,“ Shephard answered, bracing himself for the inevitable condescension.

„Very unfair the way the press treats you in law enforcement. But welcome to Orange County. I grew up here, not far from Disneyland. When I was ten, this was a quiet little county filled with orange trees and political conservatives. But it isn't so quiet any more. Interesting, I think, that three of the first six men executed since the reinstatement of the death penalty grew up in Orange County. A modern place with modern problems,“ he said, shooting Shephard a concerned glance. „And we now have a modern forensic facility to help solve them.“ Shephard noted the pride in Yee's voice, the tone of a future administrator. „We built the facility one year ago. Before that, we shipped the bodies out to local mortuaries, and our examiners made house calls, so to speak. At a hundred dollars each, we ran up quite a bill.“

„How much was all this?“

„About twelve million, but a money-saver in the long run. Frankly, I think the success of *Quincy* helped us pass the bond. This, for instance, is a fine feature.“

Yee stopped about six feet from the doors and tapped his toe on a narrow black line. The doors slid open and waited. „The electric eye is positioned exactly one gurney-length away. The only doors in the county designed to be opened by the dead.“ Yee chuckled politely. Shephard lit a cigarette and stepped in.

White tile and formaldehyde, draped sheets, gray feet. The bodies were neatly lined along the wall in front of him while technicians worked busily at a counter opposite. Four high-intensity lamps hung at intervals from the ceiling, under which four tables offered bodies to the light of forensic science. Yee led Shephard past the first three. Drained of blood to a pale gray, chests open, staggered with factory-line precision across the room, the bodies struck Shephard as more automotive than human. Yee stopped at the last one, which was covered, and produced a clipboard.

„Tim Algernon, age sixty-four, male Caucasian. The dental check was easy because we had a name and not many dentists in Laguna Beach. Anyway, he was in good health until about five hours ago. At around six A.M. he died of a massive brain hemorrhage caused by the introduction of a foreign body through the frontal lobe. The foreign body appears to be a piece of common basaltic formation, but Robbins can tell you better than I can. In my opinion a fall, even a complete unconscious fall, could not have caused the kind of penetration we have here. I don't even think a rock that size could have been thrown through the frontal lobe. In short, it appears to me that someone literally bashed his brains out. Would you like to see?“

„No, but I will.“

The head's features were indecipherable. Yee replaced the sheet.

„The body is seventy percent covered with third-degree burns,“ he continued, stopping to run a thin hand through his black hair. „Basically every part of him not touching the ground, except for the bottoms of his feet. Ask Robbins again, he knows burns. I can tell you that Algernon hosted the fire, which implies an accelerant was used. Human skin of course is both porous and fire resistant, a trait shared by most green plants, incidentally. By resistant I mean that flame will not spread naturally.“ Yee interrupted his monologue to wink at someone across the room. Shephard turned in time to see a pretty blond woman re-bury her arms in a corpse.

„Now, we found something truly interesting here, detective. Lodged in the esophagus below the epiglottis were four collections of American currency. Twenty-two bills, totaling nine hundred and ninety dollars. Given the mint condition of the bills, I'd say he ate or was forced to eat them shortly before he died. Strange.“ Yee set down the clipboard and crossed his arms. His black eyebrows contracted thoughtfully.

„How much alcohol had he drunk?“

A trace of worry flitted across Yee's smooth face. „We didn't test blood alcohol. Generally—“

„Please do. You may find some in the stomach, too.“

„Stop by after you see Robbins. I'll have your levels.“ The deputy medical examiner offered his hand and smiled.

„Thanks, doc. The new shop's a real dazzler.“

„Welcome to Orange County, detective. I hope you receive better treatment here than you did in Los Angeles.“

Better treatment, Shephard thought as he climbed the stairs to the research lab. Like he was being transferred from one hospital to the next. The face of Morris Mumford flashed inside his brain, then vanished.

Forensic specialist Ken Robbins was a dramatic counterpoint to the oriental preciseness of Yee. He stared at Shephard with puffy, red-rimmed eyes and wiped his glasses on a dirty lab coat. His head was large and block-shaped, covered with a mass of gray hair. Robbins dismissed formalities with western flair.

„Weird shit, Shephard,“ he said. „You're the reverend's son?“

„Right.“

„Well, whoever engineered this little killing doesn't have much interest in our sweet Lord Jesus.“ The Bible in Shephard's pocket suggested the contrary, but the

point didn't seem worth making yet. Robbins pumped Shephard's hand with easy power.

„What was the accelerant?“ Shephard asked.

„You know burns?“

„A little.“

„The accelerant was turpentine. Liberal doses. You probably saw that he was burned head to toe, front side. Flesh won't conduct flame on its own, so our man used turpentine. A good choice because it's cheap, easy to get around here, and it burns like hell.“

„Nice comparison,“ Shephard said. „Turpentine is used to thin paints and lacquers. What else?“

„Got me, Shephard. All I know is dead people and what makes 'em that way. In this case, what actually made this Algernon fellow dead was a twenty-ounce hunk of basalt punched through his head. There she is.“ Robbins nodded to the triangular slab of rock that rested on a table beside an imposing microscope. The rock was fist-sized, sharp-edged, unremarkable.

„Common around here?“

„That's what the books say. Coughed up by ancient volcanoes and spread around by quakes and drifts. A rock is a rock. But those hair specimens you brought in might be a gold mine.“ Robbins pointed to the microscope and switched it on. Shephard bent down and peered through the eyepiece, adjusting the focus. Magnified, the hairs looked like the trunks of redwoods, complete with bark. Two such redwoods angled through the left side of the image area, while to the right rested a fat ring the apparent size and shape of a Cheerio. „On the left are two hairs from the collection you sent me. On the right is a cross-section from a third. The round center indicates straight hair. Oval center would indicate curly. You can't tell because of the lighting down there, but the hairs, all of them, follow a black-to-gray color pattern. Keep your eye on the hairs while I up the power and tell me what you see.“

Shephard watched as the specimens tripled in size, their dull red tone fading still more with the higher magnification. „They got bigger.“

„No shit. What else?“

„Mounds. Little mounds on them.“

„Know what they are? Tocopherol acetate. More commonly known as vitamin E. If you use good conditioner on your hair, you probably have those blobs, too. That's the point, not everybody does. Did you get these specimens from a suspect?“

„Unless Algernon pulled out his own hair.“

„Then you're looking for a man old enough to have gray hair, and I don't mean a streak or two. The original color was black, not brown. Jet black. Not a Viet Cong, either. The protein analysis says Caucasian all the way. His blood type is O. And he conditions his hair with something containing tocopherol acetate.“

„That would make it an expensive product,“ Shephard noted, recalling that the contents of his own cheapish conditioner made a long paragraph on the label. And no vitamin E.

„And cheap people don't buy conditioner at all. Next.“

Robbins slid out the specimen glass and inserted another, then turned down the power. Shephard regarded the single tree trunk-like object, which was thicker, darker, and much smoother than the first. One end tapered to a nearly perfect point, the other was truncated cleanly. Midway, it was dented.

„What you're looking at is a camel's hair, believe it or not.“ Shephard entertained a brief and irrelevant vision of the killer arriving on the back of a camel. „It was in with the human hair. My first thought was a hairbrush. But it's much too thin.“

„And why the tapered end?“

„Exactly my question. I was thinking it got pulled out of a sports jacket or a sweater.“

Shephard turned up the power and watched the hair grow. More mounds. „But who would condition a jacket?“

„What?“

Shephard backed away and let Robbins study the camel hair.

„No shit. Didn't think to crank it up that high.“ Robbins stood and shook his head slowly. „You got me. And you got me on this, too.“ He replaced the specimen slide with still another.

Shephard gazed through the eyepiece at a stunningly beautiful sliver of blue. It was dark and rich as lapis lazuli. „Looks like a gem,“ he said.

„It's a cobalt compound,“ Robbins corrected.

Shephard looked again at the bright slash of blue. „Is it radioactive?“

„Give me another hour, I'll tell you.“

„What's it doing in a man's hair?“

„That's your job, dick. Maybe he takes nuclear shampoos. I just dig the treasures, you spend 'em how you see fit. I'm still working on the fabric from his shirt, the dirt under his nails, some other angles. Fire doesn't leave us much to go on.“

„It's a start. The killer rides a conditioned camel and washes his own hair with cobalt. See it all the time.“

Robbins shrugged, and guided Shephard to the door. „Say hello to your father for me. We ran around a bit together in his cop days down in Laguna. I haven't seen him since he started saving souls, but what the hell, it must be just as good as staring at stiffs all day. Good luck, Shephard. Weird shit.“

Yee was hefting a handful of something into the scale above Tim Algernon's body when Shephard walked back into the morgue. The cargo dropped; the scale swung gently.

„Blood alcohol is point two,“ Yee said decisively. „That's legally quite drunk in this state. We found another two ounces of undigested whiskey in the stomach. I'd estimate he had his last drink no longer than fifteen minutes before death.“

Shephard watched the scale reading settle at one pound, four ounces. „The money you found in his throat. Was it enough to choke him?“

„Oh yes. In fact that is exactly what he was doing before he died.“

„Can a man make sounds when he's choking? Anything loud enough to wake neighbors?“

„You mean a scream. No, and I’m afraid this money will complicate your search for motive. Why would anyone put a thousand dollars in a man’s throat when he could have put them in his own pockets?“

Shephard regarded Yee briefly, then turned toward the double doors. A good question, he thought, so good he’d been trying to answer it himself for the last six hours. Still without a workable solution, his mind resorted to the obvious. „Maybe they were full.“

Yee shook his head and emptied the contents of the scale tray with the nonchalance of a janitor.

Chapter 3

Back at the station, Shephard removed the Bible from his coat pocket and set it on the desk. The handwriting suggested order and calm: *Liars Burn and Little Liars Burn First*. Again he studied the incomplete, smeared stamp.

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This Bible Property of whom? Shephard instructed the desk receptionist to handle all calls from the press, then replaced the Bible with a telephone book.

He decided to start with the best, on the theory that anyone who can afford to leave over a thousand dollars behind can afford the best hotel in the city, and that a person on foot might be in need of a room. Predictably, the *Surf and Sand* had been booked for the last month. So had the *Martinique* and the *Hotel California*. The *Laguna Hotel* reported a single check-in at eight that morning, a „young man with a nice suntan.“ The *Whaler’s Inn* had accepted a family of five at nine o’clock, „full-on touristas,“ according to the clerk. Monday business was slow.

Shephard worked his way down the list of Laguna Beach hotels and motels, descending without luck to the city’s worst, the *Hotel Sebastian*. He remembered it from his boyhood in Laguna as a hangout for third-echelon Brotherhood converts, the money- and high-seeking opportunists who took over Timothy Leary’s organization in its last days. The owner, a James Hylkama, said that a man of „about sixty“ had checked in, bagless, at seven that morning. He had given his name as William Hodges of Fresno and paid for three days in advance. Seven would be about the right time, Shephard calculated, for a man on horseback to go from Laguna Canyon Road to the edge of the city, then on foot to the Sebastian.

His phone buzzed and Chief Darrel „Pete“ Hannover’s smooth voice summoned Shephard to his office. The chief was sitting squarely behind his oak desk, elbows out and hands folded, when Shephard walked in. He was dressed as usual in a three-piece suit that suggested commerce rather than law enforcement, action rather than the polite sloth that was Hannover’s trademark. He was known as a good administrator in a department with little to administer, and a good talker

who rarely had anything to say. He motioned Shephard to sit down and offered him a cigarette, which Shephard accepted.

„As I indicated when you were hired, Shephard, my method is to stay out of the investigations and workings of my men and women. Laguna Beach has an average yearly homicide rate of point five, which translates to one murder every two years. This is the first one all year, and the most singularly hideous that I've encountered in thirty years with the city.“ He leveled a grave expression on Shephard. „I don't want to know who your suspects are, what your leads are, or what your hunches might be. Professionals work best *sans encumbrance*. I simply want quotidian assurance—for the mayor and myself—that you are doing everything possible to make an arrest. Do I have that?“

„Everything possible, absolutely.“ Shephard dragged deeply on the cigarette and regretted missing breakfast and lunch. The smoke dazed him.

„You know how I like to think of Laguna Beach, Shephard? And I'm sure the city council and Chamber of Commerce agree. I like to think of our city as a nice quiet little town where people come and spend their money in peace. A tourist town is only as good as its image. The only thing worse than murder would be a giant shark eating bodysurfers off Main Beach. You remember *Jaws*, don't you?“

„A fine film.“

„My favorite part was the storytelling scene in the boat. The lost art of verbal painting. But I'm getting sidetracked, Shephard. My brain is on a right-side tack today. I just want you to know that I'm counting on you and depending on you. And I want you to depend and count on me, too. Say what people might about your father's former connections to this department, I can assure you that I hired you for your talent, not out of sentiment. Youngest detective on the L.A. force, weren't you?“

„That's right.“

„And you got a handful of awards and commendations before the, uh, trouble, right?“

„Yes, sir, before the trouble.“

„That's the kind of work I expect, Shephard. That's all; you can go now. By the way, how is Wade Shephard these days? I saw his television sermon last week.“

„He's fine, chief.“

„Pass along my regards, Tom. Au revoir.“

Shephard drove the Mustang through the stop-and-go traffic on Coast Highway, heading south toward the *Hotel Sebastian*. In the crosswalk in front of him a band of saffron-robed Hare Krishnas chanted and banged drums, their robes fluttering in the afternoon breeze, their shaved heads shiny in the merciless summer sun. He recognized one of them as a boy from his high school chemistry class and offered a wave. The thin young man returned a mute stare to Shephard, then aimed his droning song back heavenward. Karma, he thought. Just what the hell is it? To the west, the Pacific sparkled and heaved against the dark rocks. While he waited for the light to change, Shephard regarded the water and sky, the covey of lovely legged women who walked along the shops facing the highway. The hometown hasn't really changed, he thought. But seeing his own reflection in the rearview mirror, he realized that something had changed, and that something was himself. The hair was thinner, the face no longer boyish, the eyes calmer and less

eager. Ten years ago he had driven the same car down the same street, perhaps seen the same shops and tourists, but it didn't feel the same now. He had left Laguna at the age of twenty for the Los Angeles Police Academy, and had worked twelve years in L.A. Now he was back, without the wife he had taken with him, without the illusions of a simple life. Full circle, he thought, to the city of my birth. He did not consider himself disillusioned, simply non-illusioned. He had come to Laguna to start over. In the shower that morning he had told himself again that today he would start to start over. Was it the hundredth time?

The *Hotel Sebastian* hadn't changed, that much was obvious. He saw its dull yellow walls rising from the hill of iceplant on the inland side of the highway, a rickety structure that seemed always on the verge of collapse. The feeble stairway still zigzagged up from the sidewalk, the faded sign still proclaimed the *Hotel Sebastian* to be the „Jewel of the Pacific“.

Shephard turned left on Serra Street, climbed sharply, and swung the car into the hotel courtyard. The first cottage on his right had a sign outside that read: MANAGER: JAMES HYLKAMA. He found a space beside the manager's slot and pulled in. The courtyard was gravel, bleached white by the sun and stained by lost oil and exhaust. A grove of eucalyptus trees loomed over the small cottages, which were arranged in a horseshoe pattern. Shephard noted the rusted patio furniture outside the manager's office as he knocked. The man who answered looked like Mickey Rooney.

„Help ya?“ the man asked, his voice deep and clear. Shepard produced his badge, and the door swung open. Inside, the room was sunny and neat and smelled of bacon. A large woman bent over an ironing board, bearing down on the wrinkles of a white shirt. She looked up and smiled, but said nothing. „I'm Jimmy Hylkama. This is Dorothy. What can I do you for?“

„I called an hour ago about William Hodges. I'd like to see him.“ The bacon made Shephard think of the breakfast he'd missed.

„Popular guy, that Hodges,“ Hylkama decided. He scratched his balding head, like an acting student doing perplexity. „He checked in at seven, and an old friend stopped by at nine. Now you. Trouble is, Hodges is gone.“

„An old friend came by?“ Shephard asked.

Hylkama augmented the story with histrionics. His pudgy hands seemed to take on a separate life, rising, dipping, returning like tethered birds to his body. Shephard listened intently, making notes in his small notebook. It took him only a moment to realize that Hylkama's gestures were not the cover of a liar but the accompaniment of a man who loved to talk. The lost art of verbal painting, he thought; Hannover should see this.

Unlike the man's active hands, his narrative was straight-forward and orderly. At just after seven that morning, Hylkama was eating his breakfast of bacon and eggs. Dot had cooked it. There was a knock at the door, and Hylkama had opened it to find an „elderly type of man.“ He noted that the man was approximately his and Dot's own age, been married forty years by the way. He was short, average build, and dressed like many of his frankly down-and-out, alcoholic tenants. Gray-black hair, straight, a little on the long side. Beard and mustache, neat. Hylkama's hands became circles, which he pressed to his eyes as he made his next point.

„His eyes,“ he said. „I remember his eyes. Big as golf balls and blue, beautiful blue. Right, Dot?“

„Very nice blue, Jimmy, but not that big. Regular-sized eyes, honey.“ She smiled again and descended on the next shirt. Hylkama ignored the correction and pressed on.

The man had taken a room for three days and paid cash in advance, which Hylkama said was a *Hotel Sebastian* rule.

„What kind of bills?“ Shephard asked. „Denomination.“

Two twenties, Hylkama said, old ones. He brought Shephard an old clipboard with one broken corner and a pad of yellow paper attached. The new guest had registered as William Hodges. Shephard noted that the signature was assured and precise. With prompting from Shephard, Hylkama revealed that, come to think of it, Hodges must have come on foot—he could remember no car, no bags. And cars at the Sebastian tend to stand out, he said, because so few of his tenants had them. Hylkama’s hands loved this revelation; they fluttered, then clenched into tight, oh-the-pain-of-poverty fists. At any rate, he went on, two hours later, Hodges’s old friend Michael Stett arrived, but when he took the extra key and went to cottage five, Hodges was gone. Hylkama took a moment to describe the general solitude of his guests, „lost to bottles for the most part,“ and how Stett’s arrival had gladdened him. For Hodges’s sake, of course. Because Stett was a snappily dressed fellow who arrived in a shiny dark blue Porsche that „sparkled like a jewel“ beside Hylkama’s own battered station wagon. With friends like this, maybe old Hodges has a prayer, Hylkama had figured.

„Why did Stett want the key? If he was a friend, wouldn’t he just knock?“

„Because he wanted it to be a surprise. He didn’t want to knock; he said he wanted to let himself in and give the old guy a real happy welcome home. In fact, he told me to call him quick if Billy came back, but not to let him know he’d been here. And he gave me this to help me remember.“ Hylkama’s chubby fingers went into the pocket of his well-pressed shirt and with a flourish brought out a folded hundred-dollar bill and a business card.

The card, standard in all respects, said only *Michael Stett*, and gave a Newport Beach phone number.

„May I keep this?“

„Yes, you may. Mr. Stett asked that I keep his gift in strict confidence, but I do make it policy to help the police whenever possible. The *Hotel Sebastian* desires a respected place in the community. But I *would* like to copy that number.“

The last person on earth I’d want to leave a secret with, Shephard thought. He pocketed the card after dictating the number to Hylkama, who wrote it down on the registry. With regard to the arrival and generous gift of „old friend“ Michael Stett, Shephard turned over various possibilities in his mind, none of which seemed worth turning over.

„I’d like to take a look at cottage five,“ he said.

„Do you have a warrant, Mr. Shephard?“ Hylkama suddenly looked grave.

„No. But if I did, I’d take that hundred of yours as evidence.“ Shephard watched Jimmy Hylkama’s face relax, his exercise in sternness over.

„Sure, but don’t forget to bring this back. It’s my extra, because Stett walked off with the other one. Cottage five is opposite side, last one.“ Hylkama fetched a key

from a desk drawer and handed it to Shephard. „Don't suppose you want to tell me what's going on, do you?“

„Routine stuff, Jimmy.“

„I figured you'd say that. And it's okay with me. One thing you learn around here is don't ask questions. Most of the answers aren't very happy.“

Shephard crunched across the gravel courtyard to the opposite row of cottages and knocked firmly on the door of number five. After a moment's wait, he slipped the key into the lock and pushed open a door so thin and hollow it echoed when he closed it behind him.

His eyes got the facts but his nose caught the mood: old wood, old bedding, old lives. Disinfectant, mildew, dust, a feeble bouquet of detergent hovering just above the heavy smell of rot. The green carpet was worn heavily. The walls were paneled in pine halfway to the ceiling, and above that covered by green and yellow paper, most of which was still on. A gas heater stood in one corner, its vent shaft bent like a dislocated finger. The bed was pressed against the wall, neatly made but with a depression down the middle, body-sized. The pillow was dented likewise.

The other room served as a kitchen. The linoleum floor had cracked with age; the sink had yellowed and chipped. A set of plastic curtains lilted inward, then slapped against the window frame. Shephard spread them and found the window open; no screen.

There were no clothes in the closet, no personal items in the bathroom. A small medicine chest above the sink contained nothing but three rusted shelves and a cockroach that quickly disappeared into a crack. The shower was dry. Only the sink showed signs of recent use: the bowl was spotted with water, and the soap was still damp. Shephard pulled out the drain plug and ran his finger under the head. The bead of water that slid onto his finger was pale pink.

He returned to the main room and sat down. Hodges was neat, he thought. Stett, too. And they've likely got nothing to do with Tim Algernon. He rose tiredly from the chair, pulled open the top drawer of a nightstand beside the bed, and felt his heart accelerate.

A wallet sat neatly in the corner, well-worn brown leather, arched from use. And beside it was a can of turpentine. Score one for law and order, he thought, his insides still jumping.

He carefully removed the wallet and placed it on top of the stand, prying it open with his fingertips and shaking out the contents. There were three one-dollar bills, a driver's license, and a ticket stub. Shephard read the license: Edward Steinhelper, born 1921, gray hair, blue eyes, 5 feet 9 inches tall, 165 pounds. The address was 8798 Fallbrook Street, Sacramento. So our man bullshitted Hylkama, he thought. Who wouldn't? The man in the picture was square-faced and grim, his hair swept back from a prominent forehead, his beard long and wide. As Shephard stared at the picture, he felt his mind dividing into its two professional paths, one leading him to study the face for what it was and what it might suggest, the other wandering deeper and less logically, trying to connect it to the thousands of faces in his past. They converged emptily. He turned his attention to the stub, dated August 24, Sacramento to Laguna Beach, Greyhound bus line 52, \$16. Departing 6:30 A.M.

The bottom drawer of the nightstand was empty. Shephard took the driver's license, then put the wallet back in place. He shook the drawer, listening to the slosh of turpentine in the can.

Hylkama was at the ironing board this time, while Dorothy reclined on the sofa and smoked. Shephard knocked on the screen door, and Dorothy rose to let him in.

„Any luck?“ she asked.

„Maybe. This Hodges?“

Mr. and Mrs. Hylkama studied the driver's license, Dot looming over little Jimmy's shoulder. Hylkama hesitated anxiously.

„Not him,“ Dorothy said.

„Definitely not,“ James agreed.

„How about Stett? Describe him to me, please.“

„Big guy. Sporty type, muscles and all.“ Hylkama, of course, made a muscle. „A real good dresser. Dark hair and dark eyes, about forty-five, I'd guess. Like I said, a funny friend for a guy like Hodges, being kind of a lowlifer himself.“

„I'm going to have another policeman take a look at the room,“ Shephard said. „He'll bring back the key after that. Thank you very much for your help, Mr. Hylkama.“

„Oh, sure.“ Jimmy seemed disappointed. „Anything else I can answer? You can see I like to help when I can.“

„Not now. But you did a job, Jimbo, a real good job.“

„Yeah, sure.“ Hylkama turned to his wife. „I'll take over, Dot. Here, let me...“ He was moving toward the ironing board as Shephard left.

In the middle of the courtyard he stopped and considered Jimmy Hylkama's unfettered view of cottage five. Hylkama seemed like the sort to notice anyone leaving a cottage from a front door, he thought. The image of the screenless window fluttered into his mind, and he walked around the cottages to the back.

The back windows of the first four units were screened and curtained. A grizzled face stared at him through one as he worked his way past trashcans, litter, decrepit furniture, spare tires, and old newspapers of the kind that fill the backlots of the poor. At the last cottage he found the window screen flat against the earth.

Wonderfully preserved in the damp ground, a set of bootprints began just below the window and continued around the cottage. The triangular divot in the right heel was unmistakable. Shephard followed them until they disappeared at the stairway that led down through the iceplant to Coast Highway. Must have snuck out the back when he saw Stett coming, he thought. Good friends.

He took the stairs to the sidewalk and headed north to the pay phone at the Standard Station, where he dialed Michael Stett's number.

„Zero-five-five-zero,“ a woman's voice snapped.

„Tidy Didy Diapers?“ Shephard asked nasally.

„You have the wrong number.“ She hung up.

Shephard waited a minute and dialed again. Same woman. „Tidy Didy Diaper Service?“

„You have the wrong number, sir, this is the number for South Coast Investigators.“

He apologized, then called the station, where he requested a check on Edward Steinhelper of Fallbrook Street in Sacramento, and asked Carl Pavlik to get to the *Hotel Sebastian* as soon as he could. Pavlik was delighted. A few minutes later Shephard dialed South Coast Investigators.

„Zero-five-five-zero,“ she said again.

„Michael Stett, please.“

„What is this regarding?“

„Estate work.“

„Mr. Stett is not in. This is just the service. By whom were you referred?“

„I was led to believe this would be a confidential—“

„We are paid to screen the calls. We need a name and number where you can be reached.“

„Randy Cox,“ Shephard said, and gave the number off the pay phone.

„I’ll have Mr. Stett return your call when he arrives.“

„You’ve been very kind,“ Shephard answered, but she had already hung up.

Pavlik arrived ten minutes later, standing in the doorway of cottage five, weighted down with his forensic suitcase. In his wrinkled and ill-tailored suit, he looked to Shephard like a forlorn salesman making his last call of the day.

„Carlos, buddy, partner, chum.“ Shephard felt a nervous voltage roaming his body. „There’s a wallet and a can of turpentine in the nightstand. You may have some luck with the kitchen window. Get a sample of the water under the drain plug; it looks like blood. Try the pillow for hairs. Try the foot of the bed for soil trace. Whoever checked in here washed his hands and laid down a while. When you’re done, give the manager his key back. Arrange a stakeout for the next twenty-four hours. Get it done fast, leave no trace, and put everything back the way you found it. After that, book Hylkama and his wife for an hour session with the artist, Slobin. I want to know what this guy looks like.“ Shephard paused, running down his mental checklist. He carefully slipped the license back in the wallet. „And call the San Onofre nuclear power plant. See if they’ve got an Ed Steinhelper on the payroll.“

„Sounds like you’re in a hurry, Shephard. Anything exciting?“

„Just something I’d rather was over with.“

„Yeah, what?“

„Getting my sanity back. Officially. If Steinhelper checks in, arrest him for murder. And shoot the bootprints; I think they’ll match the ones at the stables.“ He tossed Pavlik the key on his way out.

„This stuff won’t help us without a warrant, Tom.“

„Carl, buddy. It already has.“

Chapter 4

Shephard arrived at the Los Angeles County Medical Center to find that his psychiatrist had resigned shortly after lunch. He stood awkwardly over the receptionist’s desk and tried to explain his predicament.

„This was my last session,“ he said quietly. He was particularly sensitive about mental health. „I'd like to get it out of the way.“

„Last session? Name?“

„Shephard, Tom. I'm in the police program, for—“

„Oh, officer-involved shootings,“ she said cheerfully and much too loudly. Shephard imagined the other people in the waiting room staring at him. „Of course. Maybe Dr. Zahara can check you out. I mean, take over the check-out session.“ She giggled and dialed.

Dr. Zahara was a conspicuously pretty woman in her early forties, Shephard guessed, who was behind a large desk when he walked in. The room was comfortable and lit by a lamp that rested on the desk. Dr. Zahara smiled and slipped a pair of glasses over her green eyes.

„Sit down, Tom. Be comfortable.“

Shephard sat and searched for a cigarette.

„Of all the damn things, our Dr. Abrams quitting like that,“ she said, shaking a shock of black hair and lighting a cigarette of her own. „I apologize. I'll be glad to administer this last session if you don't mind.“

„I'm eager to be finished, doc.“ He felt slightly ungrateful.

„Counseling not to your liking?“

„Not really. Not this in particular, I mean. Just any.“ He finally found the cigarette.

She opened a manila folder and scanned the contents. „You've been with us for nearly a year. Thirty-two years old, born in Laguna Beach, graduated near the top of the Academy. Youngest officer to work detectives here, very impressive. Mayor's Plaque, Outstanding Rookie, Officer of the Year, City Council Commendation. Married at nineteen to Louise Childress, divorced at thirty-one.“ She lifted the cigarette to her lips and continued to read. „June of last year, Tom, you shot a man in the line of duty. A boy, to be precise, Morris Mumford, age sixteen. Resigned LAPD November, headed back to the hometown, and took work just about two months ago. Well, how do you like it?“

Shephard's mind flitted back to that drizzly summer night in Los Angeles, and to the face of the young man he'd killed.

„Oh. It was too quiet for a while. Today we had a homicide. I look forward to working it.“ Looking forward was excessive, he knew. Having to do it, the forced activity of a job was all it was. Still, he needed it.

„Why is that?“

„It's what I do best. *Bathe oneself in the healing waters of action*, someone once said.“

„That's true. You find your work rewarding?“

„It keeps me busy.“

„Then what you find isn't necessarily more important than what it keeps you from looking at?“

Shephard searched her face as she searched his. „Keep reading,“ he said. „Abrams told me more than once that (obsession with work is nothing more than an elaborate network of action to divert oneself from the pain of self-awareness.)“

„You've got a good memory. And what is it that you think needs healing?“

Here it goes again, he thought. Probing with their well-trained shovels. She put out her cigarette and folded her hands under her chin. Shephard took a final drag and crunched his out, chasing the last of the embers around the ashtray.

„I think the healing is more metaphorical than literal, doc,“ he said. Play the game, he thought, you’re almost done with it.

Dr. Zahara smiled. „Why immerse yourself in work merely to *keep busy*? A nice-looking young man like you must require a little more from his life than business. Metaphorical or not, it was your phrase.“

Shephard began to feel claustrophobic, as if his shirt were made of steel, shrinking in around him. His back was sweating. Hold on, he thought. Exude confidence.

„You’ve got the goods in front of you, doctor. I killed a boy. But some of the guys I worked with thought I did it too late, so they named me *Too-long Tom*. My wife left me for a movie guy. My boss suggested I quit when the press and the ACLU came down. Last summer that was quite in vogue. These things all tend to make a man feel a tad lousy. When he works, he forgets them and pays the rent. When he comes to a doctor once a week to stroke the bureaucracy’s guilt, he wonders why he has to sit still and talk about it. He starts to wish that his life was a secret, you know, doc? He believes he deserves a little privacy, just like anybody else. I know what needs healing. And I think the best way to do it is to forget myself. Not to dwell. You can drink things under, or screw them under. I work them under. Work is a vacation, doctor.“ Shut up, he told himself. Be healed.

„I hear anger in you. I probably shouldn’t be sharing this with you, but ... a note here from Dr. Abrams. May fifteenth: ‘Getting response from patient nearly impossible. Cannot be provoked to talk, let alone to anger.’ You just told me more in ten minutes than you did Dr. Abrams in a year. Why?“

„You’re prettier.“

Dr. Zahara fastened her calm green eyes on Shephard and nodded matter-of-factly. „Yes, I am.“ She flipped back the pages of his file. „You realize that this program was set up to help police officers cope with the trauma of a killing. I’ve seen lives ruined over shootings, no matter how clear it was to everybody that the shooting was necessary and unavoidable. I’ve seen the drinking you talk about, and the *screwing*, as you call it. And I’ve seen a few men who keep things inside and deal with them on their own. Those types usually go one of two ways.“

„Oh?“

„They either come through the episode strong and healthy, or they kill themselves. It’s hard to tell which is going to happen. I lost a patient once whom I felt was making progress. This counseling might not mean much to you, Mr. Shephard, but it does to me. I don’t want you to become my Morris Mumford.“

„Sorry, doc. I won’t kill myself. I don’t have time.“

She smiled and closed the file, letting her glasses dangle by a chain around her neck. „I see here that your mother died when you were very young.“

„She was murdered. A man broke into the house when she was alone. I was a few months old.“ Shephard felt anger rising inside, the flippancy draining from his voice. „So I never knew her, and I don’t see what that has to do with this counseling, if it’s for a shooting trauma. The ACLU seemed to think that made me shoot the boy.“ He felt heated, clumsy, violated. Colleen Shephard was not to be

disturbed. He watched the doctor shake her head slowly, wave a hand, and for the first time, blush.

„This counseling is to help make you a healthy person,“ she said quietly. She lit another cigarette. „Do you feel healthy?“

„I smoke too much, like you. I don't sleep enough, but besides that, I feel fine.“

There was a long silence while Dr. Zahara studied Shephard and Shephard stared back.

„Have you seen other women since the divorce?“

„A few.“ He felt a shameful slide in his stomach as he reviewed his lack of contact over the last year. His one „date“ had ended in the humiliation of trying to disprove what he had known anyway, that his desire had vanished. Since then it had been easier to be alone—a common reaction, according to Dr. Abrams. The silence of Dr. Zahara demanded that he go on. „Nothing steady,“ he said.

„Is that to your liking?“

„Sure. Play the field. I've never felt the need to be connected,“ he lied.

„But you enjoyed ten years of marriage?“

Enjoyed most of the time, he thought. Louise said he suffocated her, that she couldn't grow, couldn't breathe. And something about the difference between love and need. Don't need me, don't need me so much. And the harder he held on, the faster it fell apart.

„Since that, I mean,“ he said, a partial retreat.

„It's healthy to acclimate oneself to the opposite sex after the end of a long relationship. I would encourage anyone in your position to enjoy himself. Sometimes, the simple enjoying of oneself and another person can be tarnished by the end of a marriage. We have to learn to enjoy, if you will. That sounds contrary to nature, but it really isn't. It is one of the purest delights of being human, I think.“

Shephard imagined Dr. Zahara pushing back her chair, standing and stretching languorously, coming toward him from around the desk, kneeling beside him to kiss his hand. Her skirt fell away as she stood up and his hand slipped into warmth and dampness. But when he stood to kiss her, her face cracked and blistered into Tim Algernon's and she erupted, laughing, into flames.

„I suppose that's true,“ he said. Had Pavlik gotten good latents from the turpentine can? Was the stakeout man awake, or napping behind his sunglasses? This Bible Property of whom? Why had the killer left nearly fifteen hundred dollars behind, then checked into a cheap hotel? Could the bills have been his to begin with? If little liars burn first, who second?

„Is there anything you would like to talk about?“

„No, thank you.“

„Then you're released from our care as scheduled,“ she said. „I think you are dealing with your life in a, well, a quietly positive way. Please feel free to call me any time you wish; we can set up another session if you feel the need. You have a new life ahead of you, Tom, and I wish you all the good luck in the world.“ She stood and offered her hand. „Don't be afraid to look at yourself. It can only do good. Those secrets you feel the need of having, they're common to us all. Go ahead, work. Sometimes when we lose ourselves, we find ourselves, too.“

Shephard's dog, Cal, welcomed him home with minimal interest and a guilty slink. Flipping on the kitchen light, Shephard discovered one of his shoes had been thoroughly chewed and slobbered upon, its leather lace masticated to pulp. Cal offered an unrepentant glance, then waddled off to the patio to be fed. Shephard avenged himself by carrying a box of doggie treats to the patio, commanding Cal to sit, then dropping a banana peel from the trash into his eager jaws. The mutt spit up the peel with distaste but attacked his dinner gratefully, Shephard making it extra large out of a sense of guilt.

After dinner they were friends again, Shephard pouring himself a large Scotch, Cal yawning, then falling asleep in the middle of the kitchen floor.

His evening project was to unpack the dozen boxes still stacked in the living room, but it had been his evening project for nearly two months. So much for the healing waters of action, he thought. He pulled open the top of one, confronted a framed photograph of himself and Louise dressed up Roaring Twenties style for a Halloween party, and lost heart again. Would Dr. Zahara be a good fuck? He pondered the question, but the exercise was cerebral rather than hormonal, and he got no answer. He replaced the picture face down and poured another drink.

Suddenly, the dazzling fleck of cobalt under Ken Robbins's microscope positioned itself square in his mind's eye, as if to blot out introspection. Shephard closed his eyes. The cobalt rotated of its own will, offering him rich blue facets and begging the question: What was it doing in the killer's hair? Then the blue gave way to the camel's hair. It displayed itself similarly and begged the same question. Had it come from the collar of a coat perhaps, or a hat? No one washes coats or hats in hair conditioner, he thought. The image dispersed and he opened his eyes.

Shephard recognized the process as what his father called a „Dick Probe“. He was fourteen when he had asked Wade what made a good detective. Wade was sitting at the kitchen table, halfway through a quart of bourbon. A good detective works behind his eyes, he had said. When you look at something, don't think about it. See it. Think it later. Close your eyes and let it come back. Then you can hold it as long as you want and give your brain a chance to catch up. Especially with people; first impressions are usually wrong. Your mind knows more about what you see than it lets on, so you have to be able to bring things back. Some people call it imagination; the quacks at the Academy called it meditation on evidence. Me? He had smiled drunkenly. I call it a Dick Probe.

Shephard, old enough to get the joke, blushed, then laughed heartily to cover his embarrassment. Wade had retired to his room a short time later, bottle in hand, and when the door to the bedroom closed, Shephard did his first Dick Probe—on his father. When he closed his eyes, he saw not Wade but a bourbon-colored stallion galloping through the desert, dragging a lifeless body behind it.

Shephard lit a cigarette, stepped over Cal, and went into the living room, where he dug out a dictionary from a box of books.

cobalt, *n* [G *kobalt*, goblin, demon of the mines; term applied to cobalt by miners from ignorance of its value or because it was troublesome], a hard, lustrous, ductile, metallic chemical element, found in various ores: it is used in the production of alloys; its compounds are used in the production of inks, paints, and varnishes: symbol, Co.

cobalt blue, *n*: 1. a dark-blue pigment made from cobalt. 2. a dark blue.

Cal lifted a sleepy head when the phone rang. Shephard reread the cobalt entry as he lifted the receiver.

„Tom, it's Carl here.“ Pavlik sounded breathless. „The prints on the turpentine can match the ones on the glass at Algernon's. Whoever drank with him last night left that can in the Sebastian. I picked up some soil trace from the bedspread and got ferrous earth, the same as around the stables. The water under the drain had blood in it, type O, same as Algernon's. I called Yee. Robbins is working two hairs I got from the pillow and told me that the material fragments from the body haven't told us anything we didn't know at noon. The cobalt isn't radioactive to any degree that would matter, but it's the kind of thing someone *might* pick up if he worked with metal alloys. Some kind of light industry, maybe. Or, of course, if he mined the stuff. Robbins kept saying it was real weird shit here in Laguna.“

Pavlik stopped, breathed rapidly, then continued. „Now get this. Sacramento says that Edward Steinhelper is an ex-con. He's done time for burglary, assault, embezzlement. He's been clean for three years but his wife told me he disappeared two nights ago with the car. Still gone. He worked for a shop in Sacramento until last month. His job was finishing furniture. Mr. and Mrs. Hylkama say the guy who checked in isn't the guy on the license, but maybe they're wrong. Steinhelper stinks.“

Shephard considered the cobalt, its use in varnishes. „You lift any prints from the kitchen, near the window?“

„Nothing to lift, but I shot the boot marks. They eyeball like the tracks we found this morning. Right down to the broken heel. You found the sonofabitch, Shephard.“

„Who's working the stakeout?“ he asked.

„Grimes. Said he needed the overtime.“

„The whole night?“

„He said no problem. Slobin is meeting with the Hylkamas at nine tomorrow to do the Identikit.“

„Good work, Carl, chum.“

„Same back. I'm dead. See you tomorrow.“

The idea of Grimes working the stakeout irritated him. He poured another Scotch and stared again at the unpacked boxes that constituted his new life. He smoked and paced the apartment, went to the patio to view the lights of the city below, and paced some more. Finally, just after midnight, he went downstairs to the garage.

He eased the Mustang onto Thalia Street and followed Thalia down the hillside to Glenneyre. The night breeze cooled his face, and he noted that the moon was nearly full. The tree-lined streets of Laguna seemed strange to him after years of working in the bright lights of L.A. Was there anywhere in L.A. as dark as this at night, he wondered? As he approached Serra Street, the smell of the eucalyptus engulfed the car and Shephard realized for the thousandth time just what it was that had brought the painters to Laguna at the turn of the century. Peace and quiet and a place to work. Even now, he thought, with the millions of tourists who swarm the town in summer, it was still the best place in the world to retreat,

regroup, start again. He thought of the boxes stacked in his living room as he pulled into the courtyard of the Hotel Sebastian.

He cut the headlights and U-turned in front of a white sedan parked diagonally across from cottage five. Slowly he completed the turn and dipped back out of the courtyard to park on the street. Retracing his way on foot, he approached the sedan and had his worst fears confirmed. Even through the closed windows he could hear Grimes snoring. The rearview mirror had been angled for a clean line of sight to the cottage door, but Grimes's big head was wedged comfortably between the window and the headrest. Shephard stooped to the glass and studied the bulldog face, babylike now, at rest. He noted that the windows were filthy and wondered what Grimes could hope to see, anyway. What a way to earn your overtime, he thought. There were no lights on in the cottage, and no sounds except the occasional hiss of cars down on Coast Highway. Steinhelper could have come back any time, he thought. Be asleep inside right now. Might have been for hours.

He trod lightly across the gravel to the back side of the cottages. And as he rounded the corner of the first, he stopped short at the figure of a man, outlined in moonlight, standing behind the back window of cottage five. A beam of light appeared in front of the figure, then climbed to the window. Whoever it was took a step closer and pressed his head to the lilted curtains. The beam vanished.

Shephard marched toward the cottage, eucalyptus leaves crunching underfoot, and shouted, „Hey, bud. Out for a midnight stroll? Stay put a second, will ya?“

In the clear moonlight he saw the man pull away from the window and freeze. Shephard could make out a head of curly hair, rounded in outline. He looked big. Then he turned and lumbered across the backlot toward the sloping hillside that rose behind the cottages.

„Hey, don't go away! Laguna cops here! Hold it, sonofabitch.“ Shephard pursued, reaching cottage five and angling up the hillside. Eucalyptus loomed around him, and as he peered into the dark, he could see the big man's body zigzagging through the trees, his arms pushing off the cream-white trunks.

The hillside was covered with iceplant. Shephard sprinted, slipped to one knee, rose, and slipped again. Down the second time, he saw that the man ahead of him had gone down, too. A muffled curse trailed back to him in the darkness. Up again, Shephard hugged the tree trunks for balance, launching himself from one to the next. Ahead he could see the man on all fours now, clawing up a steep embankment. Shephard dashed toward him and found himself on his face. He righted himself, churning his legs deep into the iceplant for footing. Somehow the man was widening the distance. Shephard was twenty yards behind him, down on all fours himself, pulling with his hands as his feet slipped and skidded. Everything seemed slick, as if drenched in oil. He saw the man disappear over the rise. Shephard reached the top a moment later and stopped to get his bearings.

The hillside rose steadily before him, and as he listened he could hear no movement in the dense cluster of trees. His breathing was deep and frantic, his vision poor in the murky shadows of the eucalyptus. He could feel his heart thumping in his ribs, his head, his ears. A quirk in the shadows ahead, then the snapping of a branch. „Hey! You! Stop right there...“ His attempted shout trailed off feebly into breathlessness and he started running again. As the man ahead

darted into a clearing, Shephard saw him turn his head and look back. Then he lunged forward and disappeared into the trees again.

In the clearing, Shephard stopped and listened. His legs were heavy and he couldn't seem to breathe fast enough to keep his lungs full. Silence. He waited, studying the pale trunks of the eucalyptus trees, every one of them large enough to hide a body. Then, scanning the scene in front of him, he walked slowly forward, waiting for his game to break cover. This is the place to hide, he thought. The closely bunched trees blotted out the light from the moon. Still no other sound than of his own rapid breathing. Doesn't the sonofabitch breathe too, he wondered? Too many cigarettes. Ahead of him the trunks sprouted like a regiment of towering soldiers, each a slash of bone in the blackness. Then a quick wisp behind him, head-high; no, he thought, and began to duck, but he was just beginning when the steel slammed into the back of his head and dropped him abruptly to his knees. Take a vacation, fucker—later Shephard was sure he'd heard the man say it—take a vacation because you're going to need it. Then the swift and wind-robbing jolt of a shoe in his stomach and his face pressing into iceplant.

The last thing he remembered was thinking how much iceplant tasted like blood.

Chapter 5

He awoke to a well-lit acoustic ceiling. The holes shifted and swirled, the squares stretched into rectangles and back again; a Beatles tune dripped from a speaker, watered down to almost nothing. He lifted his arm and read his name off the plastic bracelet. Spelled wrong. When he tried to raise his head, it erupted with a pain so severe it overwhelmed his mind like a tsunami and sent him floating back into unconsciousness.

Sedated dreams: gray forms looming with terrible size, slow-motion horses snorting from widened nostrils, mute women with perfect bodies, fires, voices, clouds. And later, when the sedatives began to wear off, he found himself in the dreams, an onlooker in a shadowed world of murmurs and mood, like an ego-less baby seeing events around himself, trying to understand them, understanding nothing.

When he finally regained consciousness, his father and a man he didn't recognize stood over him. Wade looked stricken. Shephard groaned, testing his pain, then propped himself up on his elbows. „Hiya, pop,“ he slurred.

His father was dressed tennis, little white shorts and little white shirt. So was the man who was with him. „Take it easy, son. You'll rip your stitches.“

„My serve. Love-fifty. Little white shoes, pop; Nikes?“ His words were escaping without thought. „Get me a Scotch,“ he heard himself say.

„That's the spirit,“ said Wade's friend.

„Tommy, you remember Joe Datilla? The *Surfside*?“

Datilla stepped forward and smiled. He looked gray, handsome, fit. A sailboat tan and a health-spa body, Shephard thought. „Haven't seen you in years, Tom. I was with your dad when he got the news, so I thought I'd come along. I'll forgive you for interrupting our tennis.“ Shephard tried his best to focus. Joe. Of course.

„I 'member old Joe. And the health spa—the *Surfside*.“

„Well...“ Datilla smiled pitifully.

„It's the ritziest sun club north of La Costa,“ Shephard blurted. Wish the room would quit swimming. „I ain't no dummy. How are ya, pop?“

„You know how I am, Tom. How are you? And what happened?“

„Someone had a party on my head, but it's okay, I feel great. Know how hangovers make you feel profound? That's me. One big hangover. I'm going to become a poet...“

Wade and Datilla laughed heartily, but his father stepped forward and ran his fingers across Shephard's face. He laid back down and touched his head, getting only bandage.

„Again, Tommy. What happened?“

Shephard offered a concussive narrative. It ended abruptly when he felt exhaustion coming over him like a warm blanket. „...So that was my night. You do anything fun?“ He settled back into the pillow.

„Did you get a look at him, Tom?“ Datilla asked.

„How old a man?“ asked Wade.

„One at a time, boys.“ He closed his eyes at a sudden crack of pain. „Yes, and forty. Give or take five years. Pretty damned dark out. Bring me the phone, will ya?“

Wade put his hand on the telephone and moved it away from his son. „A boy found you in the hills,“ he said. „When they brought you here, they called the department. The chief knows you're here, so don't worry about business right now. Just give my prayers a chance to work. Please.“

Wade the Reverend, still thinking like Wade the Cop, Shephard thought. „Welcome back to the hometown,“ he said finally. „It's changed.“ He could hear Wade and Datilla chuckle, which mingled with the piped-in music and throbbed through his head.

„Won't be so bad,“ Datilla was saying now. „As soon as you're up and around, I expect to see you out at the *Surfside*. Come by any time. We'll have a drink, maybe go for a sail. You play tennis?“

„No. Could never figure out how to keep score.“

„I'll teach you. I can think of a few ladies out there who might be intrigued by a detective.“

„Yes. I'm an intriguing man.“

„You're just a tired, beat-up man right now,“ said Wade. He stepped forward again, pressing his hand against Tom's shoulder. „We'll let you rest, son. Let's have lunch just as soon as you feel up to it. I haven't improved any as a cook, but you grew up on it, so it shouldn't kill you now.“

„Leave that to the pros,“ Shephard said.

„What'd the sonofabitch look like, anyway?“ Datilla said.

„Just a big guy with curly hair and no respect for the law.“

„Well, I hope to heaven you find him.“

„Amen,“ said Wade.

He was pronounced mildly concussed, but was released that afternoon to Pavlik. The crime scene investigator took Shephard to the *Hotel Sebastian* to get his car, driving carefully while Shephard slumped in the seat and watched Laguna Beach slide by the windows. Pavlik's voice seemed to slip past his brain without contact, Shephard hearing only snippets. Grimes picked a good time for a nap ... got Hardy there now ... watched the hotel for an hour myself ... got the key ... when I went in, everything was the same, same crappy old place ... get some rest ... got the stakeout myself tonight...

The climb up the stairs to his apartment was endless, the steps somehow multiplying in front of him. He stopped halfway when he heard his neighbour's voice booming from the doorway below.

„Hey, Shephard, wanna grind?“ He turned to focus on Sal.

„Just ate, Sal.“

„What's that shit on the back of your head, man?“

„Just a little ding.“

„You mean she closed her legs too fast.“ Sal bellowed, enjoying his joke immensely.

Shephard grinned, but a jolt of pain shot through his head. „Fishing the rocks tonight?“ he managed.

„Up too late, bro, I'm in the coffin after the grind.“

Sal roared a friendly insult to a woman passing on the sidewalk, and Shephard confronted his stairs for the second half of the journey.

Before he reached the porch he could hear Cal's quiet whining coming from inside. Shephard stopped by the door and listened ... a long whimper followed by another, the dog catching his breath, then starting in again. The muffled thumps of struggle, then nothing. Shephard slid his key into the lock with one hand, brought the Colt Python from his holster with the other, and stumbled through the door.

Cal was flopping in the middle of the living room floor, hog-tied and gagged with masking tape. Shephard stepped past the dog, the pistol held in front of him, and moved slowly into the bedroom, where he saw that the covers had been slashed lengthwise with something very sharp. He went into the bathroom, then back out to the living room and the struggling mutt. He beheld his apartment

The stereo speakers were smashed, the turntable arm twisted obscenely upward, the plants dumped from their pots onto the carpet, the lampshades crushed, his art collection—a single print of Hopper's *Nighthawks*—pulled from its frame then torn to small bits that were scattered across the floor. The boxes had been toppled and gutted, the sofa overturned, a photo album mangled and thrown atop the heap of what had once been a growing dieffenbachia. He was trembling.

He untied Cal, who fled to the bedroom as soon as his legs were free. The dog was still whining when Shephard found him on the far side of the bed, scooped him into his arms, and brought him to the kitchen. Cal shivered as Shephard set him on the drainboard and tried to cut the tape from around his mouth with scissors. Back on the floor, Cal lay down and worked his paws over his nose, fly-style, trying to pull off the sticky bands. Shephard finally rubbed some vegetable oil into the dog's hair, lifting the tape gently and pouring a slender stream of oil as

he went. Cal's right eye, puffed and bloodshot, regarded Shephard with unabashed terror. The other was swollen shut. Shephard's head throbbed as he worked bent over his dog.

The telephone rang. Shephard worked his way through the littered living room and picked up the receiver, saying nothing. A wonder it still works, he thought.

„Shephard?“ The voice was muffled and low. He waited, realizing now why the phone hadn't been pulled from the socket. „Yeah, it's you, Shephard. I left the phone alive so I could call and ask you if you got the picture. Get it?“ Shephard said nothing. „You get it. Do yourself a favor and beat it for a while. You'll make me very happy. How's the dog? Worthless in a pinch, you know.“ The man hung up.

Shephard went back out to the kitchen, poured a Scotch, and went back downstairs. He found Sal reclined on a sofa, balancing an ashtray on his stomach while he fiddled with a joint.

„Don't bust me, Shephard. I'm a good guy.“

„You were up late?“

„Like you. Have a lady up there last night?“

„No, why?“

„'Cause the fuckin' stereo was blasting for an hour. I figured you didn't feel like filling up the neighborhood with moans and groans.“ Sal's conversational voice was concert-pitch. It seemed to ricochet from one wall of Shephard's skull to the other.

„What time?“ Shephard asked. The moans and groans were Cal getting kicked and his apartment being ransacked, he thought. That's why the bastard turned up the music.

„Little after one. You ought to...“ Sal understood. He got up from the sofa, set down the ashtray, turned off the television, and shut the door. „What happened?“

„I had a visitor last night. Did you see him?“

Sal seemed to diminish in size and become more alert, edgy. „Yeah, I saw him,“ he said quietly. „I told you I was up. The door was open, I see everything that comes and goes around this ghetto. Tall and thick, good build, so I figured he was a cop. He came by the door about one, then the stereo. Back down a half hour later. The sonofabitch was driving a Carrera and I wondered how a cop got the dough for one of those. Midnight blue, right under the street lamp in front. Everything okay up there?“

Dark blue, and Michael Stett shiny, Shephard thought. „No.“

Sal eyed him warily. „Shit, Shephard. I'd have come right out with it but I wondered if you two were ... well, shit, you know Laguna.“ Sal's hand fluttered on a limp wrist.

„He was alone?“

„Alone and not in a hurry from the way he walked. I had him pegged cop all the way. Sorry, bro.“

Shephard helped the vet hold Cal's head still while the X-rays were taken. The doctor, a thick and docile man named Gillson, shot Cal with a long needle and told Shephard his dog would be all right. By the time the X-rays were processed, Cal was asleep and slobbering contentedly on Shephard's leg. His skull was fine,

Gillson said, and the swelling would go down in a day or two. After that he wanted a look at the eye.

The doctor closed the door of the examination room and asked how it happened. Shephard told him it was an accident. Gillson sighed and lit a cigarette. „Plenty of good shelters in town if you're tired of your pet,“ he said.

Back at his apartment, Shephard carried Cal upstairs and set him down on the couch. Standing amidst his degraded home, he knew that there would be no fingerprints or significant evidence, none of the careless calling cards left by youngsters, junkies, amateurs. Nothing was missing. He was in professional hands. And the act of violation was complete: his knees were still shaking, his tongue felt thick and dry. He noted the roll of masking tape tossed into the corner.

The quiet of the evening heightened his sense of aloneness as he stared down at the literal ruins of his life. Outside he heard a car moving down Thalia Street toward the highway, the far-off dialogue of a television, a peaceful breeze in the trees outside the house. The disgust he felt as he kicked the ruined *Nighthawks* frame wasn't so much for the possessions in the house as for himself. Keeper of the peace, he thought. The keeper who can't keep his wife, the keeper who can't protect his home, can't prevent his own dog from having the shit kicked out of him. And with the disgust came anger. The healing waters of action, he thought. He poured down a Scotch and made another. He smoked three straight cigarettes, lighting the last with the embers of the one before it. He paced the kitchen, and stood looking out from the balcony.

Then it all became clear.

By eleven he had piled everything from his past—letters from Louise, pictures of Louise, pictures of himself and his wife together, the books she'd given him, anything that tugged from the past rather than called him toward the future—into the middle of the floor. To this he added the boxes wholesale, and the ruined possessions that lay scattered about. His head was killing him. By twelve he had tied it all up in the slashed bedding and dragged the heavy bundles across the street, where he hefted them into the dumpster of St. Michael's Church. It took several trips. There, he thought. In emptiness will be abundance.

He called Louise. A man answered politely and asked if he could say who was calling.

„Her ex, fuckhead. Put her on.“

„Gladly.“

Then she was there, Louise, he thought: lovely, bored, drifting Louise. „Hello, Tom,“ she said. He could hear the new life in her voice, its sweet assurance. „Robert here is giving me a funny look. Did you say something bad to him?“

„Absolutely not. Scout's honor. I'm just calling to tell you I've got a new life, a grand one. I know you felt a lot of guilt about me, but I want to let you off the hook now.“

„You're drinking again, aren't you?“

„Sober every night for the last month. Got any movie parts yet?“

She paused. He could hear her breathing. „I'm not really at that level yet, Tom. Shampoo commercial, maybe.“

„Get Robbie on the ball. He's big time.“

She let the comment go. Don't be an ass, Shephard, he thought. That's not the point.

„How 'bout you?“ she asked. „Are you seeing anybody?“

Shephard felt the Scotch hitting him, a stupid confidence. „In fact I am, Lou. Karen's her name. Does some acting up your way. Karen Smythe ... was in the last Reynolds pic, you know, Burt Reynolds, forget the name of it, though.“

„Well, that's fine, Tom. I'm really happy for you.“

„Don't be. It's all a lie.“

„I know.“

„I moved back to Laguna.“

„You should be happy there.“

„Like to see you sometime, Lou. I think about you.“

„Maybe, Tom.“

By two he was asleep, and not long after accosted again by the imminent nightmare in which Morris Mumford pitched over dead on the grass while a cop tried to keep his own insides from spilling on the sidewalk. In the dream, as it had happened in reality, Shephard stood and peed his pants while his ears rang and the pistol in his hand grew too heavy to hold up any longer.

Chapter 6

Early the next morning Shephard called on Jane Algernon. Her house was on Laguna Canyon Road a half mile west of her father's stables, tucked under a massive willow tree that cast shade over the entire front yard. He smelled the strong odor of fish and heard croaking sounds as he approached. There was a chain-link pen in front of the house containing a cement pool, a slippery animal of some kind, and a young woman wearing thigh-high rubber boots over her pants. She was bending toward the animal, offering a tidbit. Shephard guessed fish. The animal slipped into the water and the woman turned. She was large and pretty, and her dark hair was pulled away from her face.

„Seal?“ he asked.

She looked at him like he didn't particularly matter. „Sea lion. You must be police.“

„Detective Shephard.“ The sea lion surfaced and croaked. She tossed a fish into the air and the sea lion surged to meet it. „Can we talk?“

„Go ahead.“

Shephard felt a chill, and it wasn't just the shade of the willow. „I'm very sorry. You have my condolences. Did your father live alone?“

„My mother died twenty-six years ago of cancer. He lived alone.“

„What kind of man was he?“

She flipped another fish toward the animal and smiled when it was caught again mid-air. The smile froze when she turned back to him. „I don't know. He ignored me, I ignored him. I'll tell you I loved him as much as any daughter can love a father. It was just better done at a distance, that's all.“

Shephard lit a cigarette. „Frozen fish?“

„Fresh frozen.“

„Of course. So, you can't tell me what kind of man he was?“

Jane Algernon sighed and put her hands on her hips. „A gambler and a drinker,“ she said. „That's how much I can tell you. Those are the kinds of things you need to know, aren't they?“

„Oh, yes, definitely,“ he said, pulling the notepad and pen from his pocket and scribbling nothing on the page. In matters of friendly questioning, Shephard had learned that preconceptions were something to be used. Played up. Street talk for street people, tough talk for people who watched too much TV, confidential talk for those who fancied themselves in the know, condolences to the needy few who turned to the police for sympathy and a shoulder to cry on. But people like Jane Algernon were the hardest: their superiority demanded submission. „Since he had the stables, I wonder if horses were what he gambled on.“

She studied him briefly, then threw another fish, fresh frozen. The sea lion backedpeddled with a croak, knocking his head on the cement siding. Shephard winced.

„Horses, football, fights. It was always that way. If you know Laguna, you won't have to ask me where he booked.!

„Oh, you must mean Marty's Sportsplace.“

„Tell Marty hello from me. It's about time he got some pressure.“

„It sounds like you don't care much for Marty.“

„I don't care for people who run others down, or those who snoop around after and try to clean it up,“ she said.

Shephard scribbled. „That's me, isn't it?“ Her back was to him and she didn't turn around. He noted that her hair was held up by two chopsticks that caught the faint light streaming through the willow. Her legs were long and looked trim where they disappeared into the boots. When she bent down to get another fish, her arms were dark brown on top and lighter underneath. She had tucked her blouse into the khaki pants and the material stretched against her back as she stooped. She is beautiful, he thought.

„That's anybody, detective.“

„Did he have any enemies? Anyone who might want to take his life?“

„If I thought there were, I'd have come to you first, wouldn't I?“

Shephard realized that he was getting nowhere, and that even in the mind of a mourning daughter who was bitter about things there would be a wealth of information, any crumb of which might prove useful. It was often the crumbs he needed most. Jane Algernon was miles away from offering any. He scribbled dramatically, flipping over a page, referring to it, then scribbled some more.

„What are you writing when I haven't told you anything?“

Shephard looked up and found her blue, angry eyes boring into him. „Just what I see,“ he said, finishing the entry with a flourish.

„And just what do you see, detective? Besides a hungry sea lion who would like the rest of his lunch.“

„I'll tell you, Miss Algernon. First I see your father. Since you say you ignored him, you might want to know what he looked like before yesterday morning.“ Shephard called to mind the picture in Tim Algernon's bedroom. „He was a big

man with a healthy head of gray hair and a love for horses. Loved to ride them, feed them, talk to them. Maybe they were something he loved even more after your mother died. People focus a tremendous amount of love on animals sometimes, especially lonely people. It's a safe, easy love because animals don't demand much. But still it's love. I see him betting horses and drinking Jack Daniels, probably too much of it. I see him tired of running the business and selling off a dozen animals he loved and hated to see go. I see him saddling up that last mare, what was her name...?"

„Rebecca,“ she said, her voice bordering on fury.

„Rebecca, but he liked to call her Becky. Anyway, they would wander off through the canyon. That's this canyon right here. Then, of course, I see what happened to him. I see him sprawled in the gravel outside the house he'd owned for forty years, a rock the size of a grapefruit planted in his brain, a thousand plus dollars in bills stuffed down his throat, and his entire body ruined by fire.“ From where he stood, Shephard could see that Jane's face had colored to an angry shade of red.

„Then I see you, his daughter, who lives walking distance from the stables. I see him drunk and saying things to you that you don't like. I see you watching him lose his money at the track. Feeding sea lions is a good profession, but it's like mine in that you don't make much money at it. You wondered why the dollars went to the track instead of down the road a bit. Bear in mind this is just speculation, Miss Algernon. I see you thinking he drank your mother into an early grave. I see you not quite forgiving him for it all the way. The last part of what I see I shouldn't bore you with, but you did ask. I see a daughter too full of guilt to admit she loved her father, and too angry at him to admit she feels betrayed. Too ashamed of herself for not doing anything to help him—and how could she?—to really try now that she has the chance to. I see a woman whose left chopstick is about to fall out.“

Her hand shot to her head and poked the dangling stick back into place.

„And, of course, I have to see me, too, since I'm here. I see a cop with a patch on the back of his head who has to walk up to this woman and ask a bunch of questions she doesn't want to hear. He wants to hear them even less, but he believes in certain fundamental things, and one of those is that killers shouldn't go free. So he asks the questions. He gets no answers, and quite frankly he feels a bit foolish. When a beautiful woman makes a man feel small, he feels real small. But he is a professional. He wants answers, he needs help. He scribbles a bunch of shit in a notepad hoping she'll think he's as dumb as he acts, and she'll finally have to ask him what he's writing. And you did, Miss Algernon.“

Shephard looked at the notepad and slid it back into his coat pocket. She was still staring at him, her eyes a cobalt blue, he thought. Demon of the mines.

„And just what is it you would like to know?“ she asked quietly. It sounded like a hiss.

„I'd like a recent photo of your father. I need a sample of his handwriting. I need the names of his friends, regular business clients, gambling buddies, drinking partners. I'd like to see his business books. I need one hour with you in his house, with you talking about him however you want. What I need might be between the lines, so anything goes. You tell me what you want to tell me. Whoever killed him

planned to kill him. It wasn't for money. Somewhere in that house, somewhere in that mind of yours is a reason."

"Is that all?"

Her voice has thawed, he thought. "Yes."

"Fine. Then get off my property and out of my sight. Good-bye. And, detective, it's got nothing to do with your patch. That's the most interesting thing about you." She turned and brought another fish from the bucket, tossing it by the tail to the sea lion. "What was your name?"

"Shephard."

"I might want to remember it the next time I talk to the chief. He's a neighbor, you know."

"Oh, right. Here's my card." He worked a business card into a diamond of chain link. "I'm sorry, Miss Algernon. My mother was killed when I was young, so I can understand what you're feeling. You don't really get over it, you just learn to turn it off. You can keep him okay, inside yourself." And not to be disturbed, he thought. Like Colleen. "Do you know Ed Steinhelper?"

"Get out." She stared at him as he turned away from the fence and headed back to the car.

Shephard found Marty Odette's black 280Z parked outside the *Sportsplace* on Coast Highway. The plates said MARTYZ and the car shone like obsidian under the nine o'clock sun. The tourist traffic had already begun to thicken; the smell of brine and suntan oil was wafting in from the beach. Shephard remembered the *Sportsplace* as a boy: a dark, loud bar where men went to watch sports on a large screen and where betting was rumored to take place. He had learned some years later that Marty Odette had done a short stretch for bookmaking, but he kept his profile low in Laguna. The cops didn't bother Marty because they liked his bar. Marty Odette had been good friends with Wade Shephard, before Wade had found God. Shephard hadn't heard his father mention Marty in years. Stepping into the bar, Shephard couldn't shake the image of Jane Algernon from his mind.

The morning drinkers in the *Sportsplace* were like morning drinkers anyplace: quiet, friendly, determined. An eight-foot-long airplane propeller still hung behind the bar. Beer seemed to dominate the counter. Shephard ordered coffee. The woman next to him looked about seventy and she smiled at Shephard. He nodded and took a stool.

"Don't I know you?" the man behind the counter asked.

"Tom Shephard."

"Tommy Shephard, goddamned." He reached over and pumped Shephard's hand.

"How are you, Marty?"

"Look around you," Odette said, spreading his arms like a pastor raising his congregation. "I'm great. Business is up. And you? How's Wade? I saw him on the TV Sunday night, a real good sermon. It made me feel like a sinner so I turned it off, but what a delivery he's got. Building some big hospital down in Mexico, isn't he?"

"The Yucatan, near Cozumel."

"After all he's been through, what a guy. What a miracle worker he's turned into." Odette was a stocky, gray-haired man with a wide face and a smile that was

quick and didn't quite line up right. He poured Shephard a coffee and then poured one for himself.

„Got any help this morning, Marty?“

„Sure.“

„Why don't you see how it tends bar?“

Odette's manner quieted a notch as he untied his apron. „Sure, Tommy.“ He disappeared to a back room and returned with a young man following him. „Come on back.“

The office was a large room with no windows, one desk, two chairs, and three telephones. They sat and Odette poured two short Scotches, a medium-priced brand.

„You heard about Tim,“ Shephard began. „I'd like to know if he was bringing you much business.“

Odette sipped his drink. The phone rang and he said to call back. „Beer drinker,“ he said. „And a helluva good guy. He'd come in Friday nights for beers, Mondays during football. A heavy beer drinker, Tim.“ The phone rang again and Marty said to call back. Then he punched the com line and told someone at the other end to answer the goddamned phone. He hung up and smiled. „Keeping the distributors off my back is a full-time job.“

„I'm not talking beer business, I'm talking book,“ Shephard said.

Marty shook his head with finality. „No more, Tommy. I'm out of that for good. That's why we're drinking this“—he held up his glass—„instead of Glenlivet.“

Shephard could hear the phone ringing outside in the bar area. „When did you see him last?“

„Friday night.“

„Anything unusual?“

„Yeah. He had a friggin' Bible on the counter with him. I asked him if he was getting born again and he told me to shut my mouth. Funny place to see a Bible in a bar, but this place is like home to a lot of the guys.“ Odette checked his watch too casually.

„I'm in a hurry, too, Marty. I want to find out who killed Tim Algernon. The people making those calls want to know your odds on the thoroughbreds at Hollywood Park tonight. And don't try to tell me they want to know what kind of gin you're pouring because that insults my intelligence and tends to piss me off. I just need three answers and I'll be out of here and you'll be back in business. One, did Algernon win big last week?“

„Two thousand on a horse called Blue Moon. Fifth race at the park last Thursday.“

„How did you pay off? What kinds of bills?“

„Hundreds, fifties, twenties. I don't know how much of which. It wasn't old, wasn't new, just bills.“ Marty slugged down his Scotch and poured another. Shephard's was still untouched.

„Who handles your rough stuff?“

Odette stood up and leaned over the desk toward Shephard. „No, Tom. That I don't touch, and never have. The guys who play here are buddies, that's it. No roughing up, no nothing. Shit, everybody in Laguna's got two things, money and a suntan. I don't have no trouble with that. Nickel an' dime.“ He sat down and

leaned back. „But speaking of muscle, I just thought of something that might help you. Tim asked me for Little Theodore’s number when he was in. I gave it to him. You know Little Theodore?“

„Sure.“

„Maybe he can help you, Tommy.“ Shephard stood up and drained the Scotch. Odette remained sitting, and a worried look crossed his face. „Not gonna close me up, are ya?“

„I’m homicide, Marty. Haven’t killed anybody, have you?“

Odette grinned. „Anytime. Stop in anytime, Shephard. I owe you one. I just got my jet license. We’ll go up for a ride sometime, okay?“

„One more thing. What did Tim drink if it wasn’t beer?“

„Jack Daniels, always.“

„Anybody here know Tim hit it big on Thursday?“

„Everybody did. He saw to that. But like I said, all the guys here are buddies. Anybody shady, I throw ‘em out. Swear.“

„Jane Algernon sends her regards.“

Marty shook his head sadly. „A knockout,“ he said, as if another one had gotten away. „And a class bitch, too. Feel sorry for her though, under the circumstances. Send her mine back, Shephard. By the way, what happened to your head?“

He stopped at a pay phone and called South Coast Investigators. This time his call rang straight through to the offices. The woman who answered the phone was polite, young, and British, and she set up an appointment for Randy Cox to see Michael Stett about some estate work. Shephard fabricated a story about a rich dead Uncle Larry and a vindictive sister who wanted it all. She was sure Mr. Stett could be of help. „One o’clock this afternoon,“ she concluded. „Cheerio.“

A collection of notes from Pavlik awaited him on the desk. The handwriting, like the man, was not much to look at but thorough and to the point.

Robbins matched the hairs; same man at stables and hotel. Nothing new on first samples.

No one came to cottage five last night. Chief implied stakeout to end midnight tonight Flair for the dramatic as always. How’s the head?

And the last, written at 8 A.M., when Pavlik was on his way home after twenty-four hours of work:

Called Steinhelper’s wife again. He showed up late last night Said he was mugged and spent a few days with friends. She said he looked it. Was drinking with a guy up in a Sacramento bar called O’Malley’s on the twenty-third, he says. Offered him a lift home and got conked. Beat him to the punch, probably. Cops on the follow, but story tracks. It looks like Hylkama was right Steinhelper isn’t our man.

Slobin did the Identikit sketch, attached.

Shephard cleared the notes away from the Identikit sketch and positioned it squarely in front of him. The face looking up at him was taut and slender, eyes

wideset and intense, nose thin, mouth full and upturned at the corners into an inadvertent, wry look of superiority. The beard was trimmed back, framing the hard face. The hair was straight and fell onto the forehead from a center part. Overall, a haughty expression, a handsome face.

It had the quality of all Identikit sketches, Shephard thought, as his mind wandered and searched backward for connections: it could be anybody and it could be nobody. No one looks like a killer, or does everyone?

Chapter 7

South Coast Investigators was located in Newport Center, a sprawling commercial complex marked by buildings that looked distinguished and trees that looked planted. The English receptionist was fair-haired and freckled, welcoming Shephard, a.k.a. Cox, with a warmly professional smile. Her name was Marla Collins, and she told him she was only temporary until fall, when she would be back in school. Shephard took a seat on a black leather sofa and awaited Michael Stett.

Half an hour later he was shown into a roomy office. The man who looked up from the desk, then stood to offer his hand, was tall and muscular as Hylkama had described, an athletic-looking man with dark curly hair and brown eyes. His face was deeply tanned, deeply lined. The nameplate on his desk said BRUCE HARMON. He grabbed Shephard's fingers rather than hand and pumped a punishing hello.

„Sit down, Mr. Cox,“ he said curtly. „Estate work?“

„I requested Mr. Stett,“ he protested meekly.

„Not available, but I own this joint and I'll be of help if I can.“

„I was told Mr. Stett was very good.“

„He's no longer with us, I'm afraid. Now, I understand you had an Uncle Lawrence of some means who left you a settlement that your sister believes should go to her. Let me get the ground rules straight, Mr. Cox, South Coast Investigators is a licensed and certified company working on a straight thirty percent commission of all settlements made to its clients. We don't involve ourselves in estates under ten thousand dollars, although we are engageable to determine the size of an estate. That can be quite a costly and time-consuming venture. People aren't always completely, well, up-front. Are those terms agreeable to you?“

„They sound all right.“

Harmon was the right size, Shephard thought, and he had the right attitude for breaking heads and dogs. Even money he's got a Michael Stett card collection somewhere.

„How much, roughly, do you think you have coming to you?“ Harmon set his elbows on the desk and leaned forward onto his knuckles. His forearms were thick and his neck massive, exaggerated by the tight polo shirt he was packed into.

„Oh, about nothing,“ Shephard said.

Harmon's eyes narrowed angrily before he had the chance to reinstate his professional manner. He smiled. „Nothing?“

„I don't have a rich Uncle Larry, and if I had a sister, she could have anything she wanted. What I do have is an interest in the murder of Tim Algernon.“

Harmon leaned back and pulled a cigarette from the pack on the desk. „And I suppose you're not Randy Cox either,“ he said.

„Shephard, Laguna Beach Police.“ He produced his badge. Harmon didn't look at it.

„Well, shit, Shepard, why didn't you just say so? I'm a private eye, not Jesse James. I help you guys any chance I get. Why all the drama?“ Harmon smiled.

„Cops are usually bottom of the list on a businessman's calendar, especially a man in your business. I figured a little bait might get me in here sooner.“

Harmon laughed heartily, but his eyes said I'd like to break your neck. „Somebody conk you?“

„Somebody conked me outside the *Hotel Sebastian*.“

„Well, what can I help you with? I'll tell you right now I don't know a damn thing about this Algernon guy except what I read in the papers.“

„Algernon was killed about six o'clock Wednesday morning. The man who did it left the scene on foot and made it to the *Hotel Sebastian* by seven. He left less than two hours later. He got two visitors, one was me and the other was you. I want to know why you were looking for him.“

Harmon shifted heavily in the chair. „How do you know all that?“

„Hylkama told me a friend of his new tenant showed up a half hour before I did. He had Michael Stett's card and your face.“

Harmon reached into a desk drawer and brought out a tape recorder. He turned it on, tested the microphone, and set it at the end of the desk closest to Shephard.

„Don't mind, do you?“

„Not at all.“

„Now, you say I was at the *Hotel Sebastian* on Monday morning, looking for your suspect, I take it. Can you substantiate that?“

„I could by bringing Hylkama down here, but that's not what I'm after. You'd be making a lot of dumb trouble by trying to tell me this isn't your card.“ He placed Michael Stett's business card on the desk. Harmon glanced at it and nodded.

„I cover when I can. Yeah, it's my card and there isn't any Michael Stett.“

„Then what's up, Bruce, buddy?“ Shephard put the card back in his pocket and lit a cigarette.

Harmon leaned forward again on his massive arms. „What's up isn't for me to know, Tom, buddy. I've been retained by an attorney to locate Ed Steinhelper. Since he's my client, we enjoy a legally confidential relationship, which means I don't have to tell you shit about him and he doesn't have to tell you shit about me. And as employees of *his* client we all three share the same confidential relationship. What it all boils down to, Shephard, and I give you all that legal crap for the record only, is that I don't know why I was hired and I don't care. As far as you're concerned, I'd like to help, but I can't give you much. I didn't find him, if that helps.“

„What did you find?“

„Same thing you did. Nothing.“

„I'd hate to think you found what you needed and locked it up in that safe in the corner,“ Shephard said.

Harmon looked at the safe, then back to the detective. „And I know you can get a warrant and have it opened. But I'll save you the trouble by telling you there isn't anything in it.“

„And if there was you'd move it by the time I got back here.“

Harmon smiled and nodded. „Hell, wouldn't you?“

Shephard knew that getting such a warrant would be impossible. He also saw that the man sitting across from him knew the law as well as he did. Probably an ex-cop, he thought. He would get nothing from Harmon. But the next best thing was to try for a glimpse of what it was he wouldn't get.

„How did you know he was Steinhelper when he checked in as Hodges?“ Shephard asked. He watched Harmon closely.

Sometimes, while the brain takes its milliseconds to form a response, the eyes in front of it will hesitate and go blank: the mind concentrating only on the task at hand. Harmon's eyes dulled fleetingly, then came back to Shephard with redoubled confidence.

„Hodges is a common alias,“ he said slowly. „For Steinhelper, I mean.“ Good, Shephard thought, smiling. Harmon turned off the tape recorder casually.

„You want him?“ Shephard leaned forward in his chair.

„Course I want him, that's what I was hired to—“

„I got him.“ Shephard offered a blank stare.

Harmon's face flushed slightly, its wrinkles seeming to deepen. If he were a TV show, Shephard thought, it would be time for a word from his sponsors. Harmon offered a stranded smile. „You do?“

„I do.“ Shephard waited. „I got him the same place you did. Out of that wallet in cottage five.“

„Get out of here, Shephard. Your games bore the shit out of me.“

„No charge, Bruce. I'll tell you where he is because I think you're such a swell guy. Come on, turn your machine back on and get it down. He lives on Fallbrook Street in Sacramento with his wife, and that's where he is right now. He got mugged and lost his wallet.“

Harmon stood up, and for the first time since Morris Mumford faced him with a hunting knife on a drizzly night in L.A., Shephard felt afraid. Harmon's face was a heavy yellow, his eyes almost too sunken to see. For a moment, the room seemed to diminish around his bulk.

„Get out, Shephard. Or I'll break your bones.“

Shephard stood up with an exaggerated sigh. „Sorry I couldn't make your job easy, Bruce. Buddy. Chum. You must be getting a thousand or so to find this Steinhelper fellow. But I understand how it is. You don't want me to tell you where he is because you weren't hired to find out where he is. You're a lousy liar and a lousy dick, too. You're not a bad back-seat lawyer though. You like dogs?“

Shephard opened the door. Harmon was still standing behind the desk, his huge hands open at his side.

„One more thing, Harmon. This man you're looking for is a killer. If you find him first and I don't hear about it, you go to jail for obstruction. Promise.“

He slammed the door and walked slowly toward Marla Collins's desk. He heard no footsteps from the office, no opening of the door behind him. Standing in front of her desk, he smiled and shook his head.

„Did you get everything you needed?“ she asked cheerily.

„I don't understand,“ he said.

„Don't understand what, Mr. Cox?“

„How a girl like you can work for a guy like him, Marla. Maybe you'd explain it to me sometime if I were to call you.“

„Well, I don't think—“

„Please give your number to me, Marla.“

„Collins, Corona del Mar,“ she said worriedly.

„Keep it quiet,“ he said, nodding toward the office.

„I will.“

He stepped outside to a raw sunlight, the manicured emerald lawns of Newport Center, and the deafening roar of a power mower being ridden across the grass by a Mexican in a big hat.

He had stepped down a short flight of stairs to the underground parking structure before he was fully aware that he had done it. At first the shadows offered relief from the bright morning, but as he moved past the cars in their stalls, he was aware he was looking for something. Nameplates were bolted to the wall over the appropriate stalls: ADAMSON & LIFSCHULTZ ATTORNEYS AT LAW, THE FAIRCHILD GROUP, GOOD LIFE MAGAZINE, LYTTLE PUBLIC RELATIONS, MAGNON ASSOCIATES, ORLANDO FOR HAIR, STANLEY PEAVEY, D.D.S. South Coast Investigators had two stalls reserved, one for clients and one for Mr. Harmon. The client space was empty, but glinting tastefully under the neon light in front of Mr. Harmon's sign was a midnight blue Porsche Carrera.

Shephard brought his face up close to the tinted window. A CB radio, telephone, and radar detector graced the dash and console, while the back seat contained nothing but tennis gear. Just looking at it made his head hurt, all ten stitches. He noted the license plate, overcame a strong urge to kick the door, then turned and walked back out to the sunlight.

Back at the station he gathered what he could on Bruce Harmon, most of which came from Chief Hannover, an acquaintance. Former Newport Beach police sergeant, distinguished service, retired ten years ago to go private, active socially in Newport Beach, a „respected if not altogether well-liked“ man, according to the chief. „Bit of a brute,“ he added confidentially.

The afternoon consumed Shephard in routine, giving him a relentless headache. He called the hotels and boarding houses again, but no one close to answering Hodges's description had checked in anywhere. Neither Robbins nor Yee had found anything new. Marty Odette had called and left a number for Little Theodore, which Shephard tried throughout the afternoon. Wade had called twice. Eight newspapers had called, ranging from UPI to Laguna's *Tides and Times*; Shephard scooped up all the numbers and dumped them into the trash. Joe Datilla had sent him a bottle of premium Scotch and a get-well card.

It was nearly four o'clock before he got through to Little Theodore. His voice was guttural, harsh, and rude as always, and strangely welcomed by Shephard. When he hung up, he entertained the image of Little Theodore—all six feet four, three

hundred and fifty pounds of him—sitting in the first pew of Wade’s newly opened Church of New Life one sweltering Sunday, sweating conspicuously, but still concentrating on Wade’s sermon. Little Theodore was something of a friend. They arranged to meet at eight o’clock at the Norton Hotel in downtown Santa Ana. Shephard left the station at six to give himself time to prepare the Jota.

He uncovered the machine and wheeled it to the center of his garage. Chrome and black, it sparkled under the single bulb in the ceiling with the splendor of a warhorse preened for battle. The handlebars were short and well forward, the seat narrow and built for one. The seamless gas tank was swept low beneath the seat, a small but flattish tank that would offer his knees a hold through the racking jolts of low-gear speed. The bars, the seat, and two tiny footpegs just above the back axle were the only connections between rider and the hundred and fifty horsepower engine that at high rev could render him deaf and half-blind with velocity and sound. Shephard had owned several motorcycles and driven many more before settling on the LaVerda Jota. He was not the kind of man who often owned the best of anything, but to him, having the Jota was a necessity that transcended its price. He had found the German machines too sluggish and domesticated, the Japanese bikes lacking in character, the American models more nostalgic than functional. But the Jota—which meant a kind of frantic dance in Italian—was perfection. More than perfection, he thought as he opened the fuel lines and checked the gas level; even more than perfection it was release. Aboard the Jota, there was always release.

A minute later Laguna Canyon Road was disappearing under his headlight, his skin tightening against his skull. He took the curves in long bites, leaning into them and accelerating out, straightening the bike and laying himself almost flat in a fifth-gear crouch when he hit the passing lane and shot past cars that seemed to be backing up. He wore goggles to keep bugs from hitting him and tears from spreading across his face, keenly aware that at the Jota’s speeds a helmet was vanity. The deep, hollow rasp of the engine droned under him. Telephone poles bunched closer and closer together. Hilltops slipped by against the pale night as if on fast film. Halfway down the road he found his rhythm, bounding back and forth between the lanes for high-apex turns that ended in straights of purest speed.

Downshifting into fourth, Shephard leaned into the long arc that connects Laguna Canyon Road to Interstate 5 and climbed onto the freeway at a modest ninety. From behind a lumbering truck, he crossed three lanes with a faint tilt of bodyweight and braced himself against the footpegs for the blast into Santa Ana. The airport lights flickered before him and were gone; the stars blurred as Irvine became Tustin became Santa Ana, and just when the entire continent seemed to be spreading itself out for him, slowly, like a lover across a bed, the First Street sign flashed by and he had only a mile to cut his speed. In a moment of lucidity before he turned off the freeway, Shephard likened the trip to making love, or what he remembered of it.

He found Little Theodore’s chopped Harley Davidson parked across two spaces outside the *Norton Hotel*. The night was warm and there were mariachis playing in the café next door. He looked through the window at them: short, wide men dressed in black, their music happy and imprecise, the guitar lagging the rhythm by a fraction of a count.

The hotel lounge was dark and smelled of beer. Little Theodore took up most of a corner booth, dressed as always in a black T-shirt from which his huge arms emerged, mirrored sunglasses, and a broad black hat. Shephard noted an addition to the hat: a band of silver dollars wrapped around the crown. Little Theodore's beard was still red, tangled, gigantic. Before him on the table were two glasses and a full bottle of tequila. A grin cracked across his face when he saw Shephard. „Hey, little jackass,“ he called. „Come over here.“

Shephard sat down and Theodore filled the glasses. The Cuervo Gold made Shephard shudder when it went down. Sitting with Little Theodore is like sitting with the past, he thought as Theodore refilled the glasses. He hasn't changed in ten years, not since Wade first hired him as a temporary bodyguard.

„Someone bash your brain pan?“ the big man growled.

„It's too hard for serious damage. Just a little dent.“

„I've been looking forward to this all night, little jackass. Man shouldn't drink alone.“ Theodore hooked down the tequila and set the glass on the table with a slap. The shot glass looked like a thimble in his hand. He pushed Shephard's face to the side. „Who did it?“

„Someone who doesn't want me working the Algernon case. You heard about it?“ Shephard drank his second glass.

„Heard about it? It's all over the goddamn papers. I figured you'd be callin' me soon.“

„The guy who hit me is a private dick named Harmon. He's an ex-Newport cop, a sergeant. He took me out at the *Hotel Sebastian* and wrecked my apartment when I was sleeping it off.“

Theodore filled the glasses again and leaned forward. „You mentioned business on the phone. Want me to break his arms?“

„No. I need him functional so I can get to his boss. But I do have some business. Tim Algernon got your number from Marty the Friday before he was killed. Did he call you?“

Little Theodore shook a cigarette from a pack on the table. „Yeah. Friday night about eleven.“

„And?“

„Hey, slow down, pissant. We got to drink, we got to ride, we got to talk. We got time to get to everything.“

„I'd like to get to this first. I've got a dozen scraps of evidence and not one good reason why someone would kill Tim Algernon. But I think he knew it was coming.“ Theodore sighed and downed his tequila. Shephard did likewise.

„He was scared,“ said Theodore. „Not whinin' scared, but casual, take-your-time, beat-around-the-bush scared.“

„What did he want?“

„First he wanted to know if I was working much these days. Then he wanted to know how my book was selling. Tell the truth, I barely remembered the sonofabitch. Played some horses with him once is all. Half an hour later, the story comes out. Says he's worried some punks know he's got money stashed on the grounds. He wants me to move in as discouragement. Room, board, five hundred a week. Which totals about a thousand a week the way I eat and drink.“

Shephard pondered the story. „Why was he worried, anything specific?“

„Just worried is what he said. He’s a big mouth when he wins big and drinks, so I figured he’d talked and was gettin’ spooked. Anyhow, I said no. I got a new old lady and she’s a real treat to drag this old sack of fat into bed with at night. Got my own place, the book is sellin’ good, me and Ray is going to write up another one. Shit, what I want to go live in some manure heap for?“ Theodore shrugged. „Now this,“ he said quietly, returning his attention to the tequila. „Now he’s a dead man. Didn’t mean to hold out on ya. Was gonna call, case you didn’t first. Drink up, Shephard. We’re all dead too soon.“

Shephard drank and felt the tequila eroding his sense of control. Just as well, he thought. He lit a cigarette, which returned him to calm.

„Whoever killed him didn’t want any money. We found him in the morning, with over a thousand dollars worth of currency stuffed down his mouth. You say he beat around the bush. What about?“

„Told you. Everything and nothing. The book, the work, the bullshit.“ Theodore leaned back; the booth shook.

„When did he want you to start?“

„Next morning.“

„Did he go up in price, or offer the five hundred right off?“ Just how desperate had Algernon been?

According to Little Theodore, Algernon had started with an offer of three hundred, then gone up to five. Then, sounding drunk, he „got weepy“ when Theodore said no. Then he hung up, and that was the last that Little Theodore heard of him until his wife read him the story in yesterday’s paper. Shephard had forgotten that Theodore could neither read nor write. I only know how to spell ten words, he liked to brag, and all of ‘em’s dirty.

„Whoever killed him smashed his head with a rock, then set him on fire. Whoever killed him sent him a Bible with a little hate mail attached. Whoever killed him has someone else in mind, too, if I’m reading it right. I missed him by two hours at the Sebastian. He’s in town. I know it.“

Little Theodore poured them two more shots and downed his instantly. Shephard obliged, put down the glass, and found himself looking at another full one. Again they drank. The music wavered in his brain, the smell of the cactus steamed up into his nostrils. Theodore capped the bottle and grinned.

„Let’s ride to your poppa’s church and finish this bottle,“ he said. „I’m feelin’ too big for this little shithole, and sittin’ with a scrawny cop don’t do much for my reputation. Besides, a little motion might be good for the memory.“ He pushed away the table and righted his tonnage, wobbling slightly as he made his way for the door. Shephard glanced at the bartender, who shook his head.

They rode deeper into Santa Ana, through the barrio and its quiet low houses and graffiti-covered walls, past the snug suburban tracts with their houselights dying out even at ten o’clock, across the tracks and the switching yard to the Church of New Life grounds. The night was warm and fragrant. They rumbled into the parking area of what had once been a drive-in theater. The Church of New Life wasn’t the only one in Southern California to start in an old drive-in. The first of Wade’s sermons had been delivered to worshippers in cars who listened through speakers hung on their windows. The old movie screen was still standing but had been converted into a billboard that displayed biblical scenes, changed seasonally.

In the midsummer darkness Shephard could make out the figure of Christ in white on the screen before them, a halo around His head, children at His feet. Shephard's vertical hold was slipping. Jesus rose and fell like a television picture on the blink. Theodore cut the engine of his motorcycle and handed him the bottle. Around them, the speakers of the Church of New Life spread out like rows of well-pruned grapevines.

„This cactus makes my brain loose,“ Theodore began. „I'm rememberin' some more of what Algernon told me. He said punks knew he had money at first, then it got changed to sound more like one punk—kept sayin' him this and he that. I think he was drunker'n hell too. Said this guy had it in for him for a long time. Got reasons to believe he's comin' back to get me, he said. Come to think of it, it sounded less like money than hurt he was after. He said havin' a hog like me around might keep him safe. He said he'd pay for his sinnin' when he was dead and he wasn't in a hurry to get that way. Yeah, that's what he talked like.“ Theodore reclaimed the bottle and gulped. „And he told me he wasn't worried just for himself, but some other people, too.“

„Any by name?“

„He said, I think there's more than me in danger. A fine old woman who lives in town might be, too. Hope it's Greeley, he said. What the fuck, I said, call the cops, Tim. He said it wasn't the kind of matter cops could handle. Guess he was right on that one, eh, Shephard?“

Theodore growled and wheezed: a laugh. Shephard, feeling the lugubrious effects of tequila, took the statement broadside and felt shamed. It was a feeling he'd had often as a rookie, often too in his first few years as a cop. But over time he had built up that protective coating that any cop who stays a cop needs. Wade had lost his stomach for it. No surprise. Somewhere it must all be stored up, he thought, as Theodore passed back the bottle. Somewhere inside everything that you deflect collects. He knew it was true. When he drank he could feel those deflected items stirring, some thick and sad, like those he had felt just now, others jagged and painful, like a river of broken glass trying to get out. His father had told him once that cops are the true garbage collectors of society, that cops see, consume, and store the million instances of ugliness that everyone else wants to put out of their lives. The suicides, the murders, the slow poisonings, the „accidents“ where a sober young man plows a new car into a lightpole at a modest and accurate forty miles an hour. We see it, Wade had said; the rest just get it from the papers.

„How's the old man?“ Theodore asked.

„Strong. Happy. Not the same man I grew up with.“

Theodore seemed to ponder this. He rubbed his beard and spit. „What do you think it was got him into the God business instead of bein' a cop?“

Shephard had thought about it often himself. „He said once that the pains of loss are the bricks of miracles. I think that might explain it.“ Shephard was aware that his mind, now tequila-drenched, was not altogether clear. He thought of Jane Algernon and wondered what she was doing.

„That's good. I'd use it in one o' my books 'cept there ain't no miracles in the story of a fat bodyguard like me. Pass that bottle, jackass.“

„Wonder if it's worth it?“ Shephard asked.

„What worth what?“

„The pain, just for a miracle.“

Theodore responded only after a long, silent pause. „Everybody’s got the hurt. Takes a special sort like your old man to turn it into somethin’ decent. Miracles go around to lots of folks, they don’t just go into somebody’s wallet. Most of us can’t make no miracle even if we tried. We just rot and die. ‘Course, anybody knows the hurt, your old man does. Tequila, young Shephard?“

Shephard took the bottle, which seemed suddenly heavy, and drank. His thoughts rioted. „When I was a kid, he used to leave at night with a bucket and a fishing pole. Told me he was going fishing. But he never came back with anything. This was once a month or so, every few weeks. So one night I followed him. I had a little motorcycle then, so I cut the lights and he didn’t know I was behind him. All the way to the pier south of town. He left his bucket in the car and walked onto the pier. I followed but stayed so he couldn’t see me in the shadows. He walked right down the center of it, never looked to one side or the other, walked with his head down faster and faster. Had to hustle to keep up. And when he got to the end he just kept on walking, right over the edge and into the water. He’d told me a hundred times not to jump the pier because once a month the tides are low enough to kill you. He never even looked over the side. He didn’t want to know. He just walked off the edge and swam back to shore. I watched him and stood there an hour trying to figure out why he did it. I couldn’t figure it out. Still haven’t. Nothing but rocks under that pier at low tide. Dried his clothes at a laundromat so I wouldn’t know.“

„What with your momma bein’ shot dead, maybe it was understandable. I ain’t no genius, but I figure having your old lady dying in front of you must make for a whole heap of miracle bricks.“ Theodore held up the bottle and the moon perched on top of it. „Maybe they was gettin’ too heavy for him.“

„I’m basically uncompromising when it comes to loss,“ Shephard announced, his words now running well ahead of his ability to think. „I mean there’s too much of it to even be an issue. You go to sleep, you get up. Morris Mumford is a helluva loss to me. But I’ll be damned, Theodore, if I was standing there again if I wouldn’t shoot him again, too. Maybe that’s the cactus talking. Maybe those are just words. Maybe that’s just a miracle brick Morris paid for and nobody’s ever gonna pick up.“

„You ain’t no reverend, Shephard. You’re just a scrawny cop with too much tequila in him. Pass that tequila, faggot.“

Shephard felt an overwhelming desire to do something, but the feeling passed.

„What happened to that sonofabitch shot your momma? Dead, ain’t he?“

„Yeah. Died in prison a while ago.“

„Well, don’t go gettin’ hard on yourself,“ Theodore growled. „The world ain’t set up for doin’ decent. Look at it. Some dumbass kid takes a knife to a cop because the cop’s the closest thing he can hate. You shoot the kid so he don’t do the same to you. The newspapers make a buck sellin’ it, the lawyers get rich talking about it. And some pecker in office makes a committee to study the problem. Nobody gives a shit about Morris in the end, except maybe you. You’re probably the only one who’ll remember him twenty years from now.“

Shephard weighed this argument against another jolt of tequila, and found it wanting.

„He had a girl,“ he said. „I saw her.“

„She’ll do better. So don’t worry it to death. The only people who do any good in the world are whores and bartenders. Don’t worry it. It don’t look good on you.“

„I guess we got off the topic.“

„We didn’t have no fuckin’ topic. Hang tight, little runt. You want me to break that feller’s arms, just gimme a call.“

Suddenly the roar of Little Theodore’s Harley burst across the night, pounding Shephard from a hundred inebriated angles, rattling his teeth. He pushed the starter and the LaVerda joined the outrage, a hoarse, low growl that spun higher and faster as he twisted the throttle. Theodore hurled the empty bottle into the darkness and his bike jerked ahead. They rode slowly through the lot, side by side past the billboard of Jesus and the children until they hit the boulevard and bellowed away in different directions.

Shephard returned to his denuded apartment early in the morning. Stripped to bare essentials, the place suggested beginnings or endings, but no present. And what is the present but an exit from the past and a waiting for the future, he wondered gloomily as he leaned over the toilet and gave up his tequila. Crossing the bathroom he caught his reflection, spectral and hollow, studying him from the mirror. „I’m starting over,“ he mumbled.

He called his father. „Was it worth it, pop?“

„Tommy? It’s—“

„Quarter ‘til three. Was it?“

„Was what? Have you been drinking?“

„A tad. Gotta tell me. Was the miracle worth the pain?“ Shephard’s voice sounded as if it came from underwater.

A pause. „Tommy, go to sleep. I’ll talk to you when you’re sober.“

„And one more thing...“ Shephard tried to gather his thoughts, but they seemed to be fraying like cut rope inside his head. „The pier. How come walking off the pier with nothing but rocks once a month? I’m talking clarification.“

„Tommy? Let me tell you something. Don’t look for the bad. Don’t play the dark notes, son, until they’re all you’ve got left to play. Forgive what you can’t change. Can you understand that? Now go to sleep. I’ll see you for lunch on Friday, all right?“

„Clarification.“

Wade hung up.

A few minutes later Shephard was asleep, relinquishing his dreams once again to the boy with the knife.

Chapter 8

He pulled the Mustang off Laguna Canyon Road and parked under the willow tree. The coffee from his Thermos was hot, and the morning news was filled with

money market advertisements and city council trivia. Across the yard he could see that his card had been removed from the chain-link fence, and that the sea lion was slouched like a giant slug against the side of its pen. Shephard's head ached vengefully, hangover on top of concussion, but his mind was clear and uncluttered. He chewed four aspirins and waited for Jane Algernon.

Half an hour later he heard a door slam and she appeared on the porch. She shot a disdainful glance his way, then walked across the yard in front of him, stopping to pull the waders from the clothesline. She was dressed in a sweatshirt and shorts, and Shephard felt like he shouldn't watch her step into the boots, but he did anyway. He took a hot gulp of coffee and stepped out of the car.

„Miss Algernon, delightful we meet again,“ he said with cheer. She glared at him as she turned to a freezer beside the house and pulled out a bag. Her face looked haggard and sleepless. Shephard watched the fish slide like melted silver from the bag into a bucket at her feet. She took the bucket to a garden hose and rinsed off the sea lion's breakfast. When she stepped into the pen the animal rushed to her side with a croak, raising its slick head to be stroked. She patted it and dropped a fish into its mouth. Like Cal without ears, he noted. „Fresh frozen?“

„Oh,“ she said with a smile. He had never known a smile could be so damaging and beautiful at the same time. He felt impaled on it. „It's the detective again. I used to enjoy these few moments alone, every morning, but not since he started coming here. What can I do for you, little man?“

„I wondered if you changed your mind about helping me. The handwriting samples I asked you for. The picture of your father, the business books. I want you to tell me about him. I thought that you might—“

„But I haven't. And I won't. And strange as it may seem, if you park in my driveway or come onto my property again, I'm going to call the police.“ She dropped another fish, which was caught mid-air and mid-croak. The animal spun in self-satisfaction, slid into the pool, sped around it without visible effort, then slapped back out and stopped at her feet again. Head-first everywhere, he thought, like Pete Rose.

„Miss Algernon, I have reason to believe that—“

„He has reason to believe,“ she told the beast. „He had no reason to believe before, but now he does. Did the detective find God last night?“ She dangled a fish, and Shephard studied the length of her body, the rounded, lovely thighs above the rubber.

„Reason to believe that other people may be in danger from the man who killed your father,“ he blurted quickly.

She shook her head and aimed the smile at him again. Looking at it, he felt loathsome, freakish. She studied him for what seemed an hour, then reached some kind of conclusion. She turned back to the animal, still dangling the fish.

„Now the detective is bluffing the witness,“ she said. „But that's okay, because really, he isn't here.“ She tossed the fish into the pool and the sea lion heaved after it. Shephard waited a long time for her attention to return to him, then began to wonder if indeed he were not really there. With each throb in his head, patience waned. Screw it, he thought.

„Not here? Yeah, I'm not here.“ He was less aware of stepping across the yard to the garden hose than he was of simply watching himself do it. He watched as he

picked up the nozzle, carried it to the pen fence, and hosed down the young woman inside. The water burst into shiny spray as it hit her, dazzling in the morning sun. „She lives in town somewhere. I don't know her name, her age, or why she's in danger. She might even be you,“ he heard himself saying. She faced him throughout the soaking, arms at her sides, hair clinging to her face in wet strands, her face clenched in hatred, the sea lion croaking gleefully as he put his streamlined face into the bucket of fish she had just dropped.

He hooked the nozzle into the chain link when he was finished. „Your father lived the last days of his life in terror, I just found out. He knew what was going to happen, and it did. If he never told you about it, I guess I can understand why. Have a wonderful life, Miss Algernon.“

Back in the Mustang, he was pleased to find his coffee still warm.

Then, a sudden beating on the window beside his face. Through the glass her voice was muted but clear, as if on a telephone.

„Bastard! Open that door, you bastard!“ A black wader thumped against the glass. Then her fists, small and pink, flattening not inches from his head. Her eyes were wide, her hair soaked and sticking to her face, her voice shrill and desperate. „Open that door, you bastard!“ Her fists hit the window in thuds, like big drops of rain. Shephard stared through the glass at her, then pointed at the door lock, which was all the way up. She threw open the door and pounced, nails, teeth, fists pounding wildly—he heard them hitting the dash, the leather seats, even the horn once, which honked quickly and sent the sea lion into a frenzied croak—then a moment's pause before a black wader blotted out the sunlight to his left and thwacked against his head with the sound of a mop hitting a floor. He was aware of his shirt tearing, a hot gouging in his ribs, and the repeated curse, „I hate you, I hate you, you little bastard!“

They spilled onto the lawn, where Jane, wader still flailing, found distinct advantage. Shephard covered up under elbows and hands, trying to keep the stitches intact. The wader slammed methodically into his ribs and head, punctuated by gasps and broken phrases. „You... bastard... get you... sonofa...“ Shephard heard the sea lion clapping and croaking at the chance finally to be the spectator.

The blows began to slow and the words started to lose their fury. Her voice dissipated into tired panting, then a final grunt as she slammed the wader once more into his ribs, then let it fall to the ground. Still covering himself, he could hear her a few steps away, sobbing fast and shallow as if she were choking. He lowered an elbow for a look.

Her back was to him; she had her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook. The noisy sea lion looped his pen again, fired with excitement.

„Shut up, Buster,“ she said. „Just shut up.“

Shephard plopped back into the car and poured some coffee into the plastic cup. The back of his head was sticky and his shirt blood-stained at the elbow. From a safe distance he offered Jane Algernon the coffee. She looked at him through a shock of matted brown hair, an expression not of victory or surrender, but relief. Brushing the hair away from her face, she shook her head. Shephard backed off and lit a cigarette.

„Okay,“ she said evenly, though her voice trembled. „Let’s get some ground rules straight. I’ll help you if I can. I’m too tired right now to care who killed my father, but if someone else is in danger I feel ... obligated to help. I can get you the handwriting, his business ledger, some photographs. And I’ll tell you what I can about him on the promise that you’ll leave your cheap, goddamned budget psychologizing out of it. I don’t need your analysis, I don’t need your guilt, I don’t need you.“

The inside of Jane Algernon’s cottage was small but neat. In contrast to the disheveled exterior, the living room gleamed with modern, high-tech appointments: a glass coffee table sat in the middle, surrounded by chrome and green velvet chairs, a low couch that matched them, a square glass end table. From one side of the room a long-necked chrome lamp swung outward to hang above the table; in the other stood a mirrored shelf containing stereo components and a small television, surrounded by plants. A breakfast nook built off the living room had more chrome and glass and a palm tree in a high chrome pot. The walls were pale salmon, the carpet a blue-gray. Shephard sat down in front of the coffee table. She crossed in front of him and disappeared into the bedroom. A moment later she was back with a damp washcloth, which she tossed to him, and a photo album that she opened over her legs when she sat down on the couch.

„Nice place,“ he said, dabbing at his bandage. Not so nice a lady, he thought. She glanced at him and handed him a snapshot.

„My father and Rebecca, taken last year. He was in good shape for a man his age. Tall and strong.“ Shephard examined the picture in the ample light of the living room. Tim Algernon sat atop the corral, Rebecca standing at his side, her face pressed into his open hand. Jane reclaimed the picture and put it back in its place. Then another, this time of her father and herself inside what looked like a barn. „That was taken five years ago. It’s the most recent one of us together. Like I said, we hadn’t been close the last few years.“

„How often did you see him, recently?“ She put back the picture. Shephard brought out his notebook, which was sadly bent from the fray.

„See him? Once a month maybe. Hi, how are you, that was all. People grow apart.“

„Yes. May I?“ Jane handed Shephard the photo album, then crossed her long legs over the velvet and leaned back. „When was the last time you saw him?“ He leafed through the book. Tim Algernon riding Rebecca, Jane atop another mare, Jane with Buster the sea lion in his pen, Jane and a young man with their arms around each other, a close-up of Buster, a quiet shot of sunlight on a vase of flowers. He looked up.

„Two weeks ago,“ she said. „About.“ She looked down, brushed something from her leg, then stared at Shephard.

„What did he say? Did he come here or did you go to see him?“

„He came here,“ she said quietly. „He sat where you’re sitting now, and we talked for a few minutes. Nothing in particular.“ She turned to face the sunlight that slanted through a window. Shephard studied her profile: her nose straight and thin, her lips full, the eyelashes golden in the rush of sun.

„Was he worried, preoccupied?“ He continued his study of sunlight and woman, a combination he decided was insurmountable.

„My father was very calm,“ she said, still facing the light. „That comes from breaking horses as a young man.“ She looked at Shephard. He ducked into the photo album.

„Uh, finances. In order?“

„He made enough money to gamble away and drink on,“ she said sharply. „He was bad at gambling, good at drinking.“

Shephard heard the bitterness in her voice. „Do you own this house, Miss Algernon?“

„What do you care? I thought you’d decided I was bitter because he didn’t help with money.“ She brushed her hair from her face and looked back out the window.

„That was just to piss you off.“ He stared at her legs, for the moment supremely happy.

„Well then, one for you, detective. I rent. Father was never interested in helping out that way. Booze and horses had first priority.“

„It’s hard for people our age—how old are you, Miss Algernon...?“

„Twenty-nine.“

„To finance homes themselves. I’ve wished my father had been in more of a position to help me when I was looking to buy. Resented it a little, too.“

She turned to him, a dull gaze. „I’m not interested in your resentments, detective.“

„Then I figured that love and common courtesy must count for something too. That’s more than a lot of people ever get.“

„I’m happy for enlightenment,“ she said. „But I always thought that poverty makes us all look a bit ridiculous.“

Shephard heard the rage working its way back into Jane Algernon’s voice. His head began to ache again, as if in warning. „I’d like to see his house now.“

„No.“ The reply was curt and final. She stood, went to the window of the breakfast corner, then turned to look at him. „I’m sorry, but I don’t think I could ... look at his things right now. I don’t feel I can do that kind of thing just yet. Do you understand?“

„Yes, and that’s why we have to go now. I need you in a mood to talk. Filters off, feelings raw. Do you understand?“ He stood and set the photo album on the coffee table. His heart was beating with inexplicable speed. He wondered if it was the coffee. He watched her round the kitchen table, look out the window again, then disappear into a back room.

A moment later she was back, with a purse slung over her shoulder and a pair of pumps on her feet. „You first, detective.“ She motioned to the door. „You stare at my legs any longer, they’re going to fall off.“

They stood on opposite sides of Tim Algernon’s den, the small bed between them, the identical pictures of the same horses peering over each of their shoulders. Jane had picked up a small trophy from the dresser.

„What I remember most about growing up were the good times we had here at the stables,“ she said, handing him the trophy. „But dad used to talk about this club all the time. How grand it was.“ She handed him the trophy, which read: TIM AND MARGARET ALGERNON—THIRD PLACE DOUBLES—SURFSIDE MEMBERS TOURNAMENT—1947. „That’s the Newport Beach club. Mom and dad were

members until the early fifties, until she got sick, I guess. He was always talking about the great days at the Surfside, the two of them playing tennis and sailing. Kind of idealized it, maybe.“

She took the trophy back from Shephard and set it on the dresser. The house had made her pensive, as he had hoped it would. He followed her as she rambled, remembered. In the living room, Jane stood in front of the big fireplace and looked into the ashes. „When I was a girl, we were close. Even when I started getting to be a woman, he was kind of a father and a mother. I guess I was eighteen maybe, before I saw the drinking doing its work on him. He'd go up and down—manic. High as a kite, then too depressed to get out of bed. Get violent too, but not with me. I watched him punch one of his horses in the face once, because she bit him. He was a strong man.“ She laughed quietly, tears welling in her eyes. „Yeah, I might have blamed him for mom dying, even though I never knew her. I blamed him for blowing his money at the track, drinking, passing out in the stable feed trough, things like that.“

Jane turned her weakening face to him. She ran her hand against her eyes, then returned to the ashes. A strand of dark hair fell across her face, hiding it from him.

„He was an easy man to be hard on,“ she said finally. „And I took advantage of it. By the time I started college I was truly ashamed of him—the way he'd carry on in town. People always telling me stories about him, where he ended up some night, how he fought, got sick. A village idiot, a clown. And gambling away the money. I could have used a little help. We all could, I guess. Anyway, there was something cold inside of me, and I knew he felt it.“

Shephard could hear her voice wavering, and Jane trying to force it under control.

„So I'd just slam him against that coldness, give him what I thought he deserved. It hurt him—I know it hurt him. Somehow, that only made me feel more right in doing it.“

When she turned again to Shephard she was red-faced, beginning to sob. He sat down on the couch, put a *Racing Form* across his knees and studied it. „Everybody blames himself when a parent dies,“ he said. „My mother was killed when I was four months old, and when I got big enough to realize I didn't have a mother I blamed myself for it. You grow into it, like a shirt. But go ahead and feel sorry for yourself if it makes you better.“ From the corner of his eye he saw her head cock sharply in his direction.

„Up yours, Shephard. I can cry if I want to.“

„Long as you understand you're crying for yourself.“

She was in front of him, thighs positioned straight before his face, her hand beginning its arc from outside his vision but descending with a swoosh through the air, gaining speed as he dropped the newspaper, caught her wrist, and forced her down, all in one motion. He stood and shoved the *Racing Form* into her hand. It dropped to her lap when she brought her hands to her face.

„There's two kinds of crying, Miss Algernon. You cry for someone else and you choke the sounds right out, and it sounds like a dog gagging on a bone. You cry until your tears are gone and there's nothing left to come out except maybe your guts. But when you cry for yourself, it sounds long and sad, like music. Like you

sound right now. You haven't cried for him yet, you're still working on yourself. How come?"

It was easier than he had thought it would be. When she looked up at him, he saw it was over. Her eyes were big and blank, and she spoke quickly, as if disgorging something poisonous, long-held.

"It wasn't two weeks ago when I saw him last," she blurted. "It was Friday afternoon. He came to my house and stunk like whiskey, and I was revolted. I screamed at him. And he told me he was scared and wanted to know if... if..." Her head was shaking.

"If he could stay with you?"

"For a few days, he said. Someone was going to hurt him and he was afraid. But he always said such crazy things when he was drinking. I said he was just *imagining*. Jesus Christ, I told him he was just drunk and stupid. I finally gave him a little peck, a little ugly peck on the forehead, and then, I sent him out. God, I sent him out."

"Who was going to hurt him, Jane?"

"*Someone*. He said someone was coming to get him. But he didn't say who, or why, or for what, and I'd heard him say things before that were wild. I thought he was maybe just lonely, tired of living alone."

Her last words were little more than a whisper, blown tearlessly in at the end of her storm. She had dropped her face into her arms, dark hair cascading over her knees and dangling in mid-air as she shook her head in disbelief.

"What else, Jane?"

"He said there might be others in trouble too. That it wasn't just him."

"Who?" Shephard watched the tears dropping onto Jane's feet, the liquid shiny on her skin. He could scarcely hear her.

"He didn't say. The whole world, maybe. He just didn't say."

Jane pitched over onto the cushions, drawing up her knees, burying her face in a pillow. Shephard saw her shoulders beginning the first shudders of what would be another storm. Worse this time, he thought. For her father. He spread an afghan over her quaking body, and went into the kitchen.

In a drawer near the telephone Shephard found a small address book, which he quickly leafed through, then pocketed. No Greeley was listed. He remembered Theodore's words. Why would Algernon hope it was Greeley in trouble? Tim Algernon was a consistently sloppy secretary. One look at the address book told him that it wasn't Algernon who had written in the Bible. Then who had? Had the killer written it himself, after the act, a triumphant good-bye? Or, perhaps, had the Bible come to Algernon earlier, the threat that had made Tim come to Jane and call Little Theodore for protection? If so, how had it arrived? Personal delivery, or by mail?

Shephard walked outside. With fumes of garbage wafting up into his face, he systematically pulled the contents from a trash can on the side of the house. Halfway down through the mess, smeared with the sticky pitch of orange juice concentrate, he found a plain brown wrapper, Bible-sized and torn open. He retrieved it with some sense of accomplishment, then set it on the ground, where he brought the fragments back to their original form.

Tim Algernon's name and address were written across the paper in the same ink and same neat hand as in the Bible that contained the threat. The postmark was Wednesday, August 20, Sacramento. Three days before Ed Steinhelper was rolled. Four days before whoever took his wallet came into Laguna on Greyhound line 52. Eight days ago, he noted: five days before Algernon died.

He found Jane on her father's couch, breathing deeply, covered by the afghan. Looking down at her, he felt a fluttering inside, of wings perhaps, as if a covey of quail were about to take flight. Then, the same frantic impulse to act that he had felt the night before, the urgent but undirected desire to do something. The conflux of feelings was rapid and contradictory. Paternal: he could adjust the pillow under her head, pull the afghan more comfortably to her waist. Carnal: he could simply stare. Professional: he could wake her. He felt paralyzed, or was it, he wondered, dumbfounded? He smiled stupidly. His path of action became clear. He walked quietly across the floor and shut the door behind him, sure he had done the right thing. As he moved through the bright noon heat he realized how long it had been since so little had mattered so much.

He felt altered, as if his system had just received a transfusion of something new.

Chapter 9

A telephone company printout listed all calls made from Tim Algernon's phone the week before he died. Shephard was handed the information by a reluctant company manager, who reminded him that the release of such data was illegal, then hustled him into a small room that contained a desk and chair. The manager's patience seemed fatigued to its breaking point when Shephard requested a number-indexed directory. The manager delivered it after a punishing wait, sighed, and shut the door.

Using the directory and Algernon's address book, Shephard translated the called numbers into names, and listed in his notebook parties called, times, duration of calls. After an hour's work, it appeared that Algernon's „fine old woman who lives in town“ was one Hope Creeley. So Theodore got it a little mixed up, Shephard thought. To „hope it was Greeley.“ Not bad for a man who can't read or write. Her address was listed as 9487 Waveside, Laguna Beach, and Tim Algernon had called her a total of twenty-four times between 5 P.M. Saturday, August 23, and Sunday, August 24. Twenty-four calls of a minute each. The last was made at 11:54 Sunday night, six hours before Algernon had had his last whiskey with the man who killed him. What can a terrified man say in twenty-four one-minute calls that he couldn't say in one twenty-four-minute call, Shephard wondered. He dialed Hope Creeley's number from the booth outside, got no answer, and dialed again.

Back in the Mustang, he headed for Waveside Drive in the north end of town.

The house was a tidy, three-story Spanish-style manse with a clay tile roof and a spacious portico whose shade smelled of citrus to Shephard. He pushed the

doorbell, which after a momentary silence prompted a muted chime from deep inside the house. Just to the right of the wooden door, a mailbox contained three envelopes. He removed them, glanced at the first and saw that it had been delivered that day. He rang again. No answer.

A wrought-iron gate opened onto a walkway that led around the right side of the house. Shephard pushed it open, the hair on his neck rising when it squeaked like fingernails on a chalkboard. The walkway was narrow and shaded from the house next door by a tall fence of redwood. It opened to a generous backyard that in spite of its size was still cloistered from the neighbors by three large avocado trees, growing in a semicircle against the back fence. Between the dark green avocados stood lemon trees, their round, symmetrical bodies sprinkled with fruit. The cement patio spread out before him like an island in a sea of grass, covered with chairs, tables, lounges, a barbecue. He judged it a peaceful backyard.

To his left he saw that the sliding glass door was open nearly halfway, the edge of a white drape lapping outward in the breeze. The family dog, a smallish breed by the look of it, had fallen asleep inside the house and its head was dangling over the tracks of the door and onto the patio. Not much of a watchdog, Shephard. Thought, considering the whining gate. He whistled quietly, but the dog still didn't budge. The breeze stirred a windchime, scattering random music.

Shephard whistled again and went across the patio to the dog. Standing over it now, it was clear to him that the animal was dead. It was a basenji, eyes half open, its tongue dangling out, the tiny chin stained with blood.

Pushing back the drapes, he stepped inside. He stood and listened for a moment, hearing nothing. The living room was hushed in shadow and emitted none of the lingering friction of recent activity. The upholstered chairs were humped quietly around a low coffee table, a piano with covered keys blended into the darkness of the far corner, a meager portion of light forced its way through the drapes and washed almost unnoticeably into the pale green carpet. Shephard drew the Colt Python from his shoulder holster, but it felt wrong in his hand. Moving into the dining room, he put the pistol back.

Why is it so difficult to see a dining table and five chairs and not imagine people sitting there, he wondered. But the dark walnut chairs, polished exuberantly and waiting just so, were vacant. The armoire towering behind them twinkled with crystal even in the dreary light. The kitchen showed no signs of recent, or any other kind of use.

„Mrs. Creeley?“ Shephard's voice echoed quickly. He backtracked to the basenji and found that his powers as an investigator of human affairs meant little in the world of dogs. The throat seemed large, the neck swollen, but didn't basenjis have a thickened, Egyptian head? The blood on the chin suggested strangulation, or did it? The expression on the dog's face told him nothing. Standing once again on the pale green carpet, he regarded the staircase that began at the far side of the living room.

He climbed to the second story, aware for the first time that the house, despite the opened patio door, was stuffy and ill-ventilated. Each of three bedrooms on the floor was decorated with a zeal for American Colonial: hardwood floors covered with red throw-rugs, white and blue bedspreads across which huge eagles cocked their heads, massive maple headboards cut with Colonial heft and grace. The

effect was museumlike, he thought, more to be looked at than lived in. Nowhere were there signs of a family's energy, that wake of activity that leaves at the very least a chair out of kilter with its table, a coat tossed across a bed or sofa, a dish in the sink.

The stairway carpet changed from green to white where it began its rise to the third story. Shephard felt a quick flicker of vertigo when he reached the final floor: the relentless white skewed his sense of balance. He called again.

The third floor was as vast as it was colorless. The white carpet opened before him to a capacious anteroom whose walls, furniture, even fireplace, were crisp white. Unlike the downstairs rooms, the anteroom stood bleached in sunlight, which entered two west-facing windows unobstructed by shades or curtains and parceled itself into bright rhomboids on the carpet. Shephard noted again, as he had as a child, that in shafts of sunlight dust settles upward rather than the more logical down. He crossed the pristine carpet to a set of double doors, white, at the far end. Swinging them open he found still more of the pale carpet, expanding before him into the master bedroom.

Shephard thought it was the brightest room he'd ever seen. A cream-colored settee was backed against the wall to his left, over which hung a mirror framed in white that reflected more white from across the room. In the center stood a king-sized bed that seemed magnified by its lack of color. Shephard suffered the momentary illusion that everything was made of plaster. When he pressed his hand against the bed, the soft texture felt incongruous.

He stood in the bathroom doorway, faced with a full-length reflection of himself. The mirrored partition gave way on the right to a large vanity area consisting of two sinks fitted with white porcelain fixtures, a mirror that ran the length of the wall in front of the sinks, a white wooden chest fastened to the far wall beside a toilet, and a sparkling bidet. He turned back to the bathroom entrance, moved past the entryway mirror again, and found himself in a similar room: white walls, white tile.

But rather than a toilet and bidet, along the far wall was a bathtub, and Shephard's first reaction when he looked at it was, Well, my sweet God Jesus, there is something that isn't white.

Lying in the tub is something definitely not white.

He backed against the wall as a flood of sweat erupted along his back, and stepped back out to the bedroom. He stood watching the dust settle upward, breathing rapidly. Then a series of mental detours, in the form of questions. When did Jane Algernon awaken? Did Cal like last night's dinner? How long could a dog survive on a strict vegetarian diet? Why does dust settle up? Who cares? Then there was the problem of his pistol. He drew it, put it back, drew it again: somehow he felt better with it dangling from his hand as he walked back into the bathroom and approached the tub.

The vortex of all the whiteness that spread around him was a naked woman. She was blackened so badly by fire that she seemed to have been reduced to some birdlike creature, a pterodactyl perhaps, with claws at the end of feeble wing-arms, a puffy underbelly, foreshortened legs that spread open obscenely and looked as if they could do little more than grasp a branch or fold flush to the body in flight. He saw a narrow face on which only the eye sockets and mouth were recognizable.

One of the tiny hand-claws clutched the end of a shower curtain rod, which was blackened to its midway point. The shower curtain itself lay jammed into a white wicker wastebasket.

The discoverer of such secrets is always first aware of his own uselessness. And Shephard, much as he had done when he looked down at the sleeping mystery of Jane Algernon, looked down at this changed woman and wondered what to do. He wanted to cover her. He felt as if he should pray. He knew he should call other policemen to divvy up the problem: Pavlik to the minutiae, Pincus to the press, Grimes to the crowd that would form outside and inquire shyly about the nature of the tragedy; Chief Hannover to the mayor, Lydia Worth and other officers to search the neighborhood fruitlessly, Robbins to remove the body, and Yee's dispassionate hands to interpret it. And he, the detective, to gather the essential from what the others found, fit the pieces together, discard the falsehoods, and approach the killer on his own.

Good Jesus Christ, he thought. What he really wanted to do was sleep. His legs weakened as he backed to the wall and eased himself down it, the Python clanging and spilling from his hand when it hit the tile.

*** **End of PART I** ***