

= PART II =

Chapter 10

It wasn't until late that night that Shephard found what he was looking for in the three-story mansion of Hope Creeley. And having found it, some time passed before he knew that he had.

After the strength returned to his legs, he had risen to call Pavlik, then stood waiting in the kitchen, locked in a waking dream. Even when the crime scene investigator arrived, Shephard was unable to fully break from the penumbral trance that enveloped him. The entrance of Pavlik played itself out with the familiarity of *déjà vu*. Shephard watched through the front window as he lugged his forensic case up the driveway, stopping not once but twice to check the address against a slip of paper in his free hand. He greeted Shephard with a haggard, 2 A.M. smile even though it was two in the afternoon, and followed the detective upstairs to the white acreage of the Creeley bedroom.

Staring down at the twisted body in the bathtub, Shephard offered some flattened words about „another stiff“ and „getting to work,“ hoping to ease Pavlik away from the numbing reality of it. But the words were wasted. Pavlik slunk back out of the bathroom as Shephard had and stood in the brazen sunlight of the bedroom, his mind, Shephard guessed, filling itself with the same kinds of deflecting questions that had filled his own. They returned to the tub side by side, like teammates breaking huddle, silently buttressing each other by their mutual presence, concentrating with an intensity geared to leave no room for fear or revulsion. They worked quickly, and the pace accelerated. Pavlik's Baggies and petri dishes suddenly seemed to blossom upon the bathroom floor. They sorted scrapings of flesh and ash from the body and tub, hair samples from the floor and beside the body, more from the wastebasket after they had removed the wadded shower curtain using a pair of cooking tongs that Pavlik claimed, in his increasingly animated chatter, were far superior to the wooden ones extolled at the Academy. The gathering of the evidence progressed smoothly, until the question of the woman's eyes arose.

„Looks like she's watching us, Tom,“ Pavlik said. Shephard ignored him until he noticed that Pavlik had quit working and sat silently looking at the woman's face. „Can you close her eyes for me, Tom?“ His face had soured to gray and there was a nervous urgency in his voice. Shephard tried to smooth the woman's eyelids down but couldn't quite manage it, neither left nor right. Pavlik leaned forward and tried it, too, but had no better luck, then mumbled something about the glow in her

eyes and no damned eyelids anyway. Then he was running his hand along the body, his voice running high as he tilted her head both ways, then leaned over and promised to find her eyelids. Shephard remained silent, watching his shock-bound partner.

With a trembling hand, Pavlik finally retrieved two fleshy sections from the far side of the body. Each was decisively cut along one side and sprouted hairs along the other. He carefully handed them to Shephard, as delicately as if they had been artifacts, chattering all along about why he became a cop and fishing with his brother on the Bend in Oregon and something about sex, before he collapsed cross-legged on the floor and turned his frantic, crushed gaze to Shepard. After a long and wordless rest, Pavlik carefully put away his dishes and bags, replacing them on the floor with his fingerprinting utensils.

„Sorry,“ he said.

The investigation in Hope Creeley’s house dragged on with unbroken monotony for the entire afternoon. By the time they had packed up the forensic gear and called Ken Robbins’s bodysnatchers, Shephard was exhausted. As he stood and looked out the window of Hope Creeley’s bedroom, he realized it was not just from the physical tedium of bending, scraping, dusting, spraying, lifting, and photographing for three straight hours. More than the physical frustration of the work was the mental fatigue that comes from knowing that all the work will amount to nothing. The fatigue from realizing—as Shephard had realized even as Pavlik was walking up the driveway and checking the address—that he wasn’t doing the job wrong, he was simply doing the wrong job.

The idea had hit him quickly.

That night he sat up under the single lamp remaining in his razed apartment and made out a list of predictions on what Robbins and Yee would find. He anticipated that the accelerant would be turpentine again, that at least one of the scores of human hairs collected would match the ones found in Tim Algernon’s tightly clenched fist, that the killer had entered sometime during the early morning or evening through the unlocked sliding patio door, that the dog’s neck would be broken or his throat crushed. In short, a repetition of the sundry, fragmented, peripheral, and presently barren intelligence that he already possessed. He drank a Scotch and smoked. Later, with the wretched image of Hope Creeley in his head, he wandered with Cal through the city, a tall figure in a wrinkled jacket, his gaze rarely leaving the dark sidewalks, his lanky body bent forward at the waist as his long legs carried him with effortless and deceptive speed.

For the first time since he had looked down on the disfigurement that was once Hope Creeley, Shephard felt the protective numbness lifting from his mind. He realized as he passed the quaint and long-closed shops of Forest Avenue that the murder of Hope Creeley had taken the case from routine homicide—if there was such a thing—into a darker, more menacing realm. A realm governed by logic and purpose, still well hidden. So well hidden, in fact, that not even three days of exhausting work had allowed him to guess an answer to the most fundamental question: Why? Wade had often told him that solving a premeditated murder was nothing more than the reading of a story. To understand the murder was to

understand the plot, he had said. Crimes of passion and crimes of profit offered their scenarios to even the least competent detectives, who had only to read stories that a child could understand. According to his father, every motive was a beginning. The motive became flesh through action.

But a murder without a motive seemed to him like a story without words, or one written in a strange language. Shephard, his angular face beveled into shadow and light by the street lamp, grappled with the comparison. Somehow, it seemed apt. A book composed by a mind not easily grasped, he thought, like that of a madman or a genius. As he crossed Coast Highway and made his way into the cool onshore breezes of Main Beach, he had a premonitory fear that fingerprints, Identikit sketches, hair specimens, blood samples, and flecks of cobalt could pile up from his desk at the station to the roof of the universe and still amount to nothing but an indecipherable language. A book without understandable words, he decided.

When he came to the shoreline, Shephard turned south and paralleled the effervescent violet of whitewater that swirled and broke about his feet. He thought of Jane. A party was taking place around a campfire on the sand, the people lit to copper by the flames, their laughter reaching him in snippets interrupted by the waves. A boy and a girl, still wearing bathing suits, broke away from the group and ran after each other into the water, the girl shrieking before she jumped. Another couple stopped to offer him a puff of sweet marijuana, which Shephard politely declined. But the lovely aroma that trailed them as they left, so ripe with forgetfulness and the promise of dreams, tempted him as he hadn't been tempted in years. Since he was a boy, in fact, and walking along this same beach with Louise. He smoked a cigarette instead, recalling that he had in fact accepted the joint from Louise, eagerly and with feelings of great sin. They had finished it and laughed until they found a dark parting in the cliffs, then snuggled in to kiss and grope and decide once again, with a profound swelling in his heart and ache in his groin, to wait until they were married. They had tried, and almost made it too, though it hadn't been all that long to wait. Just like Louise to say, let's try, but not be able to quite do it, he thought. But that was another matter, his defense perhaps.

Louise, he thought. Was the reality love, or the end of love?

Just before midnight he stood in front of Hope Creeley's Spanish-style home, fingering in his pocket the key he had found in her kitchen drawer. After admonishing Cal gently, he brought it out and let them in.

Cal immediately followed his nose, cruising the hallway for smells, veering unexpectedly and for no apparent reason, stopping suddenly as if something in the air had commanded him to. Shephard took to the house also, wandering, meandering, looking but not knowing for what. Certain fragments found their way into the pockets of his coat: Hope Creeley's address book, which contained Tim Algernon's number as well as his father's; an unopened telephone bill; a handful of matchbooks that had been decoratively placed in a brandy snifter; a shopping list written in a cramped, nervous hand.

Dimly, Shephard remembered a bedroom wall covered with framed mementos and photographs. On the second floor he found it, in the last of the three bedrooms.

While Cal sat attentively at his feet, Shephard regarded the framed history. Hope Creeley at high school graduation; in a newspaper photograph that showed her as a Red Cross worker; in a portrait taken as a young woman, standing in her wedding gown with the groom, pushing cake into each other's mouths. She was a handsome, slight woman, with a plain but friendly face rimmed with light curls. There was something self-contained about her, Shephard thought. Even in the picture of her wedding day, he detected something remote and controlled in her smile. A smile of agreement, conformity, not mirth or abandon. The same smile Hope Creeley wore aboard a motor yacht where she stood on deck with two other couples.

The photograph was blurred by age. He recognized the couple to Creeley's left: Mr. and Mrs. Wade Shephard. And the third man was familiar. Shephard closed his eyes and tried to dredge the man's name from his memory. A handsome, outdoor-looking man, someone to whom life had been good. The face taunted, but remained anonymous.

Below the yacht picture was a shot of Hope Creeley and her husband standing in front of a tennis net, their racquets in their hands, a trophy at their feet. Embossed into the matte border in fine gold letters was the legend:

SURFSIDE MEMBERS TOURNAMENT, 1947
BURTON AND HOPE CREELEY

The same tournament Tim and Margaret Algernon had played in, he thought. Shephard removed the picture from the wall, examined it under the direct light in the center of the room, and replaced it. Cal yawned and wandered away. The photographs seemed to end around 1950, he noted, as if everything memorable in the woman's life had been completed by then. He turned off the light and headed for the third story, wondering why it was such a bad year for Surfside tennis players.

He crossed the white expanse of the anteroom and stood beside the nightstand in the bedroom and noticed something for the first time. No wonder we missed it, he thought. White, like everything else in the room, it blended chameleonlike into the wall behind it. But one look at it explained why Tim Algernon had called twenty-four times instead of once.

Like a million other frustrated callers around the world, he had gotten the answering machine rather than his intended party.

Shephard sat down on the bed, turned the rewind switch, and waited for the tape to stop. It didn't have far to go. Then he pushed the play button, lay back on the hard bed, and stared at the ceiling.

A man's voice, calm and peaceful: „This is Reggie, Hope. Just called to say hello. Did you see the yellow rose by the hedge this morning?“

A woman's voice, older, enthused, concerned: „It's Dorothea again, Hope. Thank you so much for your contributions to the Society. I can't wait to read it and I know the pictures will be a delight. Please come see us again soon. Bye now.“

Then, a deep voice that spoke slowly and deliberately:

„Hope, this is Tim. Sorry I missed you. We have to get together and talk, please. My number is 494-1318. Goodbye.“

The same voice: "Tim Algernon again. I hope you're on vacation. Please call me as soon as you get in, it's very important."

The next caller listened to the message, waited, and said nothing. It took him five seconds to hang up. Shephard stopped the tape, rewound it, and listened to the empty five seconds again. The sound of cars on a fast street, and one horn honk.

Tim Algernon called again: „Tim Algernon, Hope. Call me as soon as you get this message. Promise?“

The first caller, still calm and peaceful: „I hope everything is okay there, dearest Hope. Perhaps we'll have breakfast again? Toodles.“ He hung up.

Then a long wait, traffic moving in the background again, and the distant peal of bells. The voice came fast and hurried: „Did you get my little package, Hope? I'll bet it made your skin crawl, didn't it? You don't have to call me because I'll be calling on you. No matter what you do.“

There was a pause while the traffic and bells continued in the garbled background. Then the voice continued: „Look to God, look to heaven, and look to hell, Hope. It's so nice to be back in Laguna Beach. Hello, hello...“ The caller hung up.

Shephard lurched up from the bed, rewound the last message, and played it back. Again the long pause, the cars and bells. The hurried, severe voice, speaking as if he had to get the call over with so he could get on to business.

Followed by Tim Algernon again: „Sorry for all the calls, Hope, but I've got something urgent to see you about. Please call me. If I could explain it in thirty seconds, I would. Again, it's Tim Algernon, 494-1318.“

And Algernon again: „Hope, call me immediately. I think you may be in danger and I know that I am, too. Please call Tim. Hurry.“

Then a new voice, or rather, two of them. First a pert „Oh,“ as if in mild surprise, then a pause, followed by a voice that Shepard recognized immediately: „Hello, Mrs. Creeley. We're returning your confidential call of yesterday. Please call us anytime.“

Marla Collins and Bruce Harmon, he thought: confidential as hell.

Then the hurried voice again, this time sending a nervous chill up Shepard's spine: „Poor Timmy, poor Tim. Haven't you heard?“ There was more traffic in the background before he hung up. It was the last call on the tape.

Shephard rewound again to the threatening message. He listened to it twice for the words, which he scribbled into his notebook as they were spoken, and once to count the bells ringing the time in the background.

There were seven.

„Good old Saint Cecilia's,“ he mumbled to Cal as he stood up from the bed. „She always tells us the time, doesn't she, Cal? Even with all the traffic on Coast Highway.“

Shephard removed the tape in case some other interested party—Bruce Harmon, for instance—should want to hear it. With the first inklings of luck stirring inside him, he stood up. Cal was already asleep on the floor.

Little package, he thought. Little package. He wondered if it might be book-sized.

The inklings of luck were true. Not that any great amount of it was needed to pull out the nightstand drawer. But there was the Bible, nestled in the corner beside a bottle of nail polish and an unopened packet of cotton balls. The inside of the back cover bore a stamp more decorative and informative than the stamp on Algernon's book, a fancy, cheerful filigree that read: *Forest Avenue Books, Happy Reading*. The book was not new. But he reasoned that the handwriting on the first page was. The ink was red and the familiar penmanship was ordered and skilled:

*For the Lord your God is a devouring Fire,
A jealous God,
He is coming to make His misery yours.*

To the collection of matchbooks, address books, and notes in one pocket, Shephard added the Bible in the other, forming a ballast for the long walk home. Outside the door, approaching the darkness of a hedge, he found the small yellow rose that Reggie had asked about. He wondered if she had seen it or not.

He covered the miles back to his apartment quickly and easily, well ahead of purposeless Cal.

Chapter 11

The proprietress of Forest Avenue Books welcomed Shephard with one of the overly grateful smiles worn by the owners of floundering businesses. She was old, pert, and leather-faced, and studied Shephard with the intensity of a hawk over a good field. He introduced himself and brought Hope Creeley's Bible from his pocket.

„I'd like to know if you sold this book recently,“ he said.

The woman introduced herself as Sally Megroz. When she took the book, her bony hands dipped from the weight.

She flipped to the first page and brought her face close to the paper, nodding.

„That's me,“ she said. „Sold it early in the week. Let's see just when it was.“

She worked her way to the register desk and pulled a dusty, flimsy cardboard box from under the counter. With a lick of her finger she parted the stuffing of pink receipts. She brought three close to her face before she nodded again and looked up.

„Monday the twenty-fifth. Three dollars because it was used. Only book I'll sell used.“ She handed Shephard the slip and stepped back. „You know about Hope Creeley, I suppose.“ Her voice was suddenly accusing.

„Yes,“ he answered. „Did you know her?“

„Did I know her? Of course I knew her. She was a regular customer. I don't understand why there are always enough police to write parking tickets on my customers but not enough to keep something like that from happening.“ She met Shephard's stare with a defiant raise of the chin.

„We do what we can, Mrs. Megroz. What did the person who bought this Bible look like?“

„A very nice older man. Came in about two. I had him pegged for religion or self-help when he walked in. I try to guess which section they'll head for. I was right.“ Self-help or religion, he thought, Jesus. She returned the receipt to her derelict box.

„What did he look like?“

„Shorter than you but taller than me. Medium kind of build. Older gentleman, graying and very sweet. He wore a beard. He was dressed in old clothes, so at first I thought he was one of the new winos in town. They come in for the summer from the harsher climes, you know.“ Come south from Sacramento for the summer, Shephard noted.

„Did you talk with him?“

„Yes, in fact he admired the painting there.“ She turned and pointed to a violent seascape hanging on the wall behind her. A ship was being dashed on the rocks of some unforgiving coast, its crew flinging themselves into the sea. He thought of his ruined print of Hopper's *Nighthawks*.

„Admired it?“

„Very much,“ Mrs. Megroz said defensively, as if Shephard's judgment in art was suspect, or perhaps retarded. „He said the strokes were very confident and the colors well orchestrated. I added that the emotion was what I liked. Not that all paintings should be so extreme. But I admired the gumption, you might say. He said that the painting was obviously done from the heart, not the brain.“

„What else? Anything?“

„That is all I remember.“

„And he paid cash?“

„He did.“

„Tell me,“ Shephard said as he brought the Identikit sketch from his coat pocket. „Have you ever seen this man?“

Sally Megroz brought the drawing to her nose and for a long time it didn't come down. When it did, her face had gone pale. „Monday. That's him,“ she said quietly. „Why is such a nice man as that wanted?“

„He killed Hope Creeley, Mrs. Megroz.“ Shephard let the statement take effect before he continued. „And anything you can tell me may help us find him. Unless you'd rather have me writing parking tickets.“ He looked through the glass door to the cars jammed into the parking slots on Forest Avenue.

„He got one,“ she said.

„One what?“

„A parking ticket!“ Sally Megroz's voice climbed an octave as she spoke. Her eyes narrowed, as if she were getting some kind of revenge, long overdue. She recalled how he had paid the money, gone to the door, then turned around and come back in. He said the police were giving him a ticket so he may as well browse a minute longer. „Damn the cops again, scaring away my customers,“ she added. „But I eat my words, sir. I'm damned happy about this.“ Her chin trembled and tears welled in her eyes.

Shephard steadied her frailty with a consoling hand. „You've done well, Mrs. Megroz,“ he said, inwardly grinning at his good fortune and the high bureaucratic

irony of a killer being issued a parking ticket. „Can you tell me what kind of a woman Hope Creeley was?“

Sally Megroz's face hardened into a mask of loyalty, compliance, eagerness to help. She described Hope Creeley as a very private and very kind woman. She was a great reader of biography and history. She had recently brought a collection of pictures and a diary to the Historical Society, a donation that had thrilled both Mrs. Megroz and the society director.

On the inside track of his memory, Shephard heard again the second caller on Creeley's answering machine.

„Dorothea?“

„Dorothea Schilling. We were so happy to get them. Hope was very aware of the sweep of history in our little town.“ Shephard put the Bible back in his pocket. Sally Megroz took a step forward and spoke confidentially. „If you want to know about her, you should get Dorothea to show you the photographs and diary. Really, she was more an acquaintance than a true friend. A very private woman.“

Like Tim Algernon, the very private man, Shephard thought. And like Algernon, a former member of the prestigious Surfside Sail and Tennis Club of Newport Beach.

„Did you see his car?“ Shephard asked hopefully.

She turned her pale gray eyes to him and shook her head slowly. „At my age, these old eyes miss a little. I could see Tammy the meter maid writing a ticket out the window and the car was red. I'm sorry, but that's all I can tell you.“

„You've been very helpful.“ Shephard gave her a card and shook a cool, unresisting hand. „If you think of anything that might help us, give me a call. Immediately, if you see that man again.“

He stopped at a pay phone to relay the parking ticket search to Pavlik. The crime scene investigator had rebounded since his grim encounter with Hope Creeley; his voice was excited again, his words coming quickly. Robbins and Yee had started early on the body, he said. Robbins had called to report that again turpentine had been splashed in liberal amounts over the body. Yee's lab had already issued a preliminary cause of death, unremarkable considering the evidence: death by burning. Pavlik took to the parking ticket search like a bird to the sky, ringing off in a hurry and telling Shephard to call in an hour. „Let's nail this sonofabitch,“ he said.

Dorothea Schilling of the Laguna Beach Historical Society looked historical, Shephard thought as he introduced himself. She was bundled in a pink sweater, even though the day was already eighty and the musty Society rooms were unventilated and stifling.

After Shephard asked to see Hope Creeley's recent donations to the Society, Dorothea led him to the back of a second room and pointed to a lumpy couch. „Right here is where you sit,“ she said. With his back to the doorway, sinking into the couch so far he wondered if he'd ever get back out, Shephard waited for her to return. Some time later she was back, pushing a dull gray cart with a loose wheel that squeaked and wobbled. Finally she was before him, smiling, offering a low, wide box that bulged at the sides. „I thought you might like some peace and quiet,“ she said.

He studied the box. „How about the diary, Dorothea? May I see that too?“

She shook her head gravely. „I’m sorry, but Hope’s desire is that the diary remain sealed until five years after her death. It’s a matter of—“

Shephard brought out his badge. „I forgot to mention, Dorothea, that this is police business.“

She nodded, brows furrowing. A moment later she was back with a heavy, leather-bound book.

He felt like the prisoner of an overly kind aunt, but the feeling was not altogether unpleasant. She brought him a cup of instant coffee so strong that it was undrinkable, so hot that the plastic spoon had wilted into uselessness. He thanked her profusely, smiling as she hobbled off to the front room cinching the bright sweater around her neck.

The box contained newspaper clippings taped to notebook paper. The articles were yellowed and weakened by time, and the tape had collected a dark residue of dust around its edges. But each sheet was dated in the upper right corner, and they were arranged chronologically. Shephard set the stack on the couch beside him, glanced at the vile coffee, and started at the beginning.

Hope Augustine had first surfaced in the press in 1943, when she was pictured in the *Laguna Week News* as one of several local women honored for her work with the Red Cross. She was third from the left in the group shot, a dreamy smile on her face, her hair held severely back with a clip. The article said that she had recently returned from service overseas. Later that year she was again pictured in the *Laguna Week News*, this time for organizing a volunteer support group for the South Laguna Hospital. The group called themselves the Angelitos—Little Angels—and the other women were like Hope Augustine: young, pretty, happy. They had dedicated themselves to outpatient care and fund raising. Hope was president. She was quoted succinctly in the short article: „I think work like this is the least we can do in wartime.“

A year later she was pictured in the engagements column of the same paper. Her betrothed was Burton Creeley, an accountant and partner in the newly formed Surfside Sail and Tennis Club in Newport Beach.

No wonder she was a member, Shephard thought. Had she known Tim Algernon then?

Apparently, Hope Augustine had become Hope Creeley and moved to Newport Beach, five miles north of Laguna on the same unspoiled coast. The *Newport Ensign* picked up her story again in late 1944, when she was pictured as the new bride of businessman Creeley. He was beside her in the wedding shot, a frail, dapper man who was five years her senior. The couple appeared regularly through 1944 and 1945, favorite targets of party-going photographers. They were pictured aboard yachts, at ground-breaking ceremonies for additions to the Surfside Club, in tennis garb at post-tournament parties. One photograph was similar to the one he’d seen in Creeley’s house: Hope and Burton standing on the Surfside court, a trophy at their feet. The happy couple continued their public lives through the forties, always surrounded by the postwar gaiety and newfound opulence of the Surfside Club.

Then Burton Creeley was dead. An article dated September 26, 1951, said that fishermen had discovered his body dashed against the rocks of the Newport jetty.

The next day's *Santa Ana Register* said that Creeley was known to swim every evening in the ocean, sometimes in the channel at Newport, sometimes south in Laguna Beach where the currents were known to be treacherous. Burton Creeley was officially classified as the victim of a swimming accident by the Newport Beach Police on September 29.

But on the next day, the *Register* ran a short article with a large headline, claiming that Creeley had been seen by two friends in Laguna shortly before the accident had taken place. A follow-up story stated that the friends turned out to be two gas station attendants who „believed“ they recognized Creeley from newspaper photos. A Newport Beach police captain wryly questioned how a body could wash six miles north, around a jetty, and end up in the Newport Channel in less than a night.

The press lost interest, and Hope Creeley disappeared from the public eye for twenty-four years.

Shephard felt a keen sadness as he looked at the next picture. It was dated November 28, 1975, and showed Hope Creeley, thin and undeniably without happiness, staring back at the photographer. She had organized a support group for the South Laguna Hospital again, and again they called themselves the Angelitos.

Hope Creeley had never looked so far away from heaven, Shephard thought. The women around her were young and vibrant, as she had once been, but Hope Creeley looked pained. Her eyes were still large, but her face had shrunk around them, sagging heavily at the mouth. A year later she was pictured again, this time receiving an award from the hospital's board chairman, whose beefy grin dominated the one-column shot.

Hope Creeley's forced and very minor smile was the last one of her public life.

Shephard turned the last clipping onto the pile beside him and lit a cigarette. A sad life and a sadder death, he thought. But why would an avenging God come to make His misery hers? Hadn't she had enough?

The cigarette tasted raw and bad. He dropped it into an ashtray and watched the smoke lift upward through the stale air. Behind him, from the Historical Society lobby, he heard Dorothea Schilling sneeze, open a drawer, dryly blow her nose. She doesn't even know yet, he thought.

He hefted the leather-bound diary onto his lap. As he scanned through the book, he saw that the handwriting evolved from a graceful, purposeful flow to a more pragmatic curtness, and finally into wild scribbles that made up the last several entries.

The opening passage was dated January 1952. Four months after her husband's death, Shephard thought. He felt the pain in her words as he read:

I have fulfilled one half of my New Year's resolution by beginning this diary, and I'll fill the other half when I join the Angelitos again. The truth is I'm awfully tired of the support group, even though momma and everyone else tells me to get out of the house and participate. But every time I feel any energy, it takes me back to a time when such things meant something to me. Now, being part of a group is just like taking dead flowers and putting them in the vase I used to put Burt's roses in. And speaking of that vase, I put it on the kitchen

table today and watched the sunlight break through it into a small rainbow. It was lovely but I cried. I feel him everywhere. Mother says I should slowly remove such things from my life and only hold onto the good memories. This seems like good advice, to hold onto only good things. But I'm not sure what to do with the vase. Can good things hurt, too?

Shephard pondered the question respectfully as he turned to the next entry. It was two months later, March 21, 1952:

I'm still having the cramps and jitters inside me. When I think of loving Burt, they get worse and it's like my mind is trying to forget but my body wants to remember. Sometimes I wake up so hungry for him that my face is wet from tears, and other things are wet too. It isn't easy for a woman to be alone after being loved by her husband so much. I know that I was not the only woman he made love to, but I know that he never loved her the way he loved me. She is a slut, but I'm not bitter. There is simply no room for bitterness. My heart actually feels like there is something around it, squeezing sometimes. I shopped for two again today, but I felt bad by the time I got to the cereal and had to put my sunglasses on. I still haven't joined the girls at the hospital yet. But so sweet, some of the letters the patients have written. Maybe when I put some weight back on. Ten pounds down from only a hundred to start with and all the clothes look funny. Still never hungry. It feels so strange when men look at me now.

The next entry, made on March 26, 1952, unnerved him:

Poor Wade Shephard and poor Colleen. Just because bad things happen to us is no reason to forget the bad things that befall others. Wade and I had dinner once last week but we didn't find much to talk about and it was a very dark event. He got drunk and I did, too, but it was not a cheerful drunk but a gloomy one and over early. People like us should be good for each other. But I would rather be with someone whose life has been easier on them. I'm sure he thought the same of me. Joe was still very nice to arrange it. He has been so good, getting his pharmacist to fill the prescriptions for me, and no charge, even. The pills, they make me feel dumb and warm and forgetful. I guess sadness gets bigger when you share it Wade has lost weight, too. Must have looked funny to the others at the club, two weight-losers and mate losers. At least Burton was an accident. I have no doubt that Azul killed Colleen, he was such a violent and uncaring man. I'll never understand what so many of the women saw in him. Joe was most helpful in helping me prepare my testimony. Good God, my problems are small compared to Colleen's. Or Wade's. Wish I could sleep regular hours. Sleep, now there's a powerful drug.

Shephard finished the entry and tried to picture his father and Hope Creeley dining in some dark corner of the Surfside Restaurant, forcing conversation and drinking for relief. But Hope Creeley's cramps and jitters seemed to transfer themselves to his own stomach. The passage about Wade and Colleen was

violation. He felt awkward, angry—the same feelings that he had had as a child, a fist-clenching, biting, wildly violent passion to destroy the mention of his mother's death, yet to preserve her memory inviolate. Shephard lit another cigarette and let the calming nicotine swarm his brain. The memory of his mother was not memory at all, he thought, but the creation of it. He had never known her. Yet he had labored to imagine what he might have known. And the Zaharas and Creeleys of the world were intruders, the memory-wreckers. Safe and warm, he thought. What better judge than me to edit my own past?

A trickle of sweat dropped down his back as he wiped his forehead with a sleeve. Drop it, he thought. Healing waters. Unprofessional, intrusive, destructive. He pressed ahead. The next entry was made one year after Burton's death, September 26, 1952:

Exactly a year now since Burt drowned. It was a lovely day today but it made me remember because seasons will make us do that Even without the lights and decorations, if December came around you would still think of Christmas. It's in the blood, I guess. A very busy month, moving to Laguna. The Surfside was simply too haunted for me—having to see the things that made me happy and even the things that didn't, like Helene. And all the people talking behind my back about her and Burt. Nobody says anything to me. I feel sorry for her. But Laguna is small and beautiful and not so many people know me, so they don't look at me with those damned pitying eyes. Everything is growing so fast, so many new people. Something inside of me is changing. I don't have the pains and cramps so often and my bones don't feel like they're made of iron anymore. I got out of bed early today. I no longer like my bed so much. Not that I want another man. Think about Burton so much still. Had my first period in a year last week. Think I was bleeding when he died. My new neighbors here are quite nice. The Ottens on the left and Laras on the right. The little Lara girl is so cute, all cheeks and freckles. Of all the things Burt left me, I wish that one of them could have been a child.

He skipped ahead nearly ten years, to May 5, 1962:

Big race to Ensenada today from the Surfside. I'm writing this from aboard Joe Datilla's boat, the Priceless, which is why the handwriting is so nutty. Maybe the gin too. It's been a great race and I think we're somewhere in front Joe hates to lose and takes everything so serious. This is supposed to be my turn to sleep, but too much coffee and excitement, I think. Reggie Often said he'd leave his wife for me yesterday, and I told him not to be so silly. Such a sweet little man, and a good neighbor.

December 7, 1963:

Whenever I hear this date my blood seems to go metallic and something rings in my ears. I can still remember what I was doing when we were attacked. I was playing with Skeeter in the front yard and dad had just heard on the news about Pearl Harbor. He was screaming and bellowing at mom,

then she was crying and quick on the telephone with her friends. I kept looking up in the sky and wondering if I might see a Zero, and dumb Skeeter just barked. What a horrid winter this has been. I can still hear the drums and see that dark procession at John Kennedy's funeral, and those pictures of Jackie with the blood on her legs and everyone saying what a coward she was for trying to climb out. Poor, poor woman. The wind blew all day here when they buried him and it was a bad day. I feel so low now, I'll write another time.

Shephard moved ahead twenty years, to the last entries in the book. Hope Creeley's handwriting had decayed into a heavy and erratic scrawl, sometimes angling up the page, sometimes down. He could almost feel the pressure of her hand as she tried to keep the pen steady. August 25, the day that Tim Algernon had been killed:

I've never had such a feeling of foreboding in all my life. Today I got out of bed and went to the garden. Someone had pulled off two of my best roses in the night Reggie kept following me up and down the hedge yesterday and tried to kiss me by the perennials. He wants an answer about the movies, I know. So lonely since his wife passed away. Then the afternoon paper came and Tim Algernon dead, I went to the bathroom and was sick but nothing came up. Even Skeeter seemed slowed up today. The first Skeeter was a better dog until the trash truck hit him. The new Skeeter is a good dog and I like the way his tail curls and his ears point I like the barklessness of him. A silent dog is almost a perfect dog. Tim kept calling but I never returned them, and now I wonder if the police should know. I want to be left alone, no Tim and no one but Skeeter and me and he can't even bark. Poor Tim now. One of the old Surfside gang and such a nice big man. So much bad has happened to so many of us from back then. Bad luck hangs in the air like the pyramids at El Giza. The world is so big, but so empty. The wind especially, like the day they buried the president and it just kept blowing like breeze off the ankles of God. I wonder if part of Burton is flying around in it sometimes. I know now, as I look back, that I held onto him too long after he was gone, just as I held onto him too hard when he was with me. It seems impossible that a person might do something so simple as loving wrong. I'm sure Burton is somewhere out there in that wind. He always wanted flying lessons.

Then, the last entry, made two days before Shephard had found her body, August 26:

Been inside for two full days now. Won't answer the phone and don't want any more mail. What is happening? Got this very nice Bible in the mail Tuesday with a very bad note inside the cover. I've called the police twice but hung up. Joe Datilla said not to worry because it was probably a bad joke or the wrong address but my name was right on the package. Been rubbing my eyes all day for some reason. Called Reverend Shephard today but he was out. I don't know who would send me such a thing. Joe says just stay home and take care of myself and work on my writing or something even though I told him I was tired

of it. He's always been so respectful since Burton. They were always at odds but such good partners, Datilla and Creeley had such a good ring to it. I'm sure he felt responsible for Burton because he was weaker and they argued and gossip had them enemies but not true at all. There just seems no end to the bad luck. The Shephard boy is now a policeman and working on Tim. I almost called him but I hung up. I am just a foolish old woman and really not that old at all. I remember him when he was little, always baseball and bicycles for little Tom Shephard. Born into all the messes that happened before. We should all move a million miles away from where we start off.

The old pictures make me sad. Going to pack all this up today and take to Dorothea at the Historical. I'm sick of writing, and who cares about the old times anyway? Time for me to be rid of it all and start on something else. Perhaps knit more. Who would send me such a bad thing as that Bible? I feel safe in the house here like Joe said. Saw Wade Shephard's sermon on the TV last week and really very good. He's grown into such a strong, good man after all the hell he was in after Colleen died. Skeeter misses his walks. Just thought of it now, but it's been three years since I've been to the beach, although I can see a little bit of it from the third floor here, and with the white all around me and the quiet, the ocean doesn't seem as terrifying as it used to. Tried to get my life as white as could be. That sounds like laundry. Always think of parts of him being in the ocean. But that is over now. Everything seems over now for some reason. I'm tired. Good night Burton.

As if approving an official statement, Hope Creeley had signed the last page. Shephard saw that the signature, unlike the scribbled entry, was clear, confident, and graceful. A final testimony to spirit over gloom, hope over despair. In some small way, he thought, she had won.

And so, in a way, had he. A path was opening before him now, and it pointed straight to the Surfside.

Behind him, Shephard heard the door open, the jingling of a tiny bell, and Dorothea Schilling's frail voice welcoming a new browser to the Society. The voice of the man who answered her was deep, clear, and unmistakable.

„I'm Toby Benson with the *Times*, doing a story on Hope Creeley. I understand she made a donation to the Society recently. May I see it?“

Mrs. Schilling explained that the contributions available to the public were already being enjoyed by one history buff, and that Mr. Benson could join him in the back room. A moment later, Mr. Benson's large and well-dressed form was standing over Shephard, his face hardening as he looked down. Shephard stood up and left the diary and clippings on the couch.

„Bruce Hard-on, buddy, chum. How the hell are ya?“

Bruce Harmon reddened, and Shephard was aware of the rage percolating through the big man's body. In the cramped room, he looked even larger than before, and less predictable.

„It's public record now,“ he said slowly. „Public record now that the Historical Society has it.“ Dorothea Schilling's wide-eyed face peeped from around a wall.

„They don't have it, Bruce. I do. If you want a look, tell me who sent you to take it.“

Harmon's eyes found the diary and box of photos laying on the couch beside Shephard. His instincts told him to smash what was in his way, Shephard guessed; his brains told him to wait. And Shephard's own instincts told him to arrest Harmon for obstruction and hold him forty-eight hours before not bringing charges, which would be thrown out by the district attorney anyway. But something beyond instinct told him that Bruce Harmon was worth more left alone, that the free are at liberty to make mistakes. Cop and ex-cop read each other's thoughts with identical speed and accuracy. At the same time, they offered each other the slow, premeditated smiles used by police officers throughout the world, smiles as dry and mirthless as sand, meant to lull, confuse, disarm.

On his way out, Harmon nearly capsized Dorothea Schilling, who had just come around the corner bearing another cup of scalding coffee. He grunted past her, slamming through the door. She watched him in cowed embarrassment.

„So many of them lose interest,“ she said confidentially. And she reluctantly consented to let Detective Shephard keep the Creeley diary for „a day or two at the most.“

From a pay phone on the highway, Shephard called Pavlik and found that a red 1964 Coupe de Ville had been ticketed outside Forest Avenue Books at 2:12 P.M. on Monday, August 25. The car was a convertible and the plates read 156 DSN, California. And due to Sacramento's usual computer logjam, Pavlik lamented, he still didn't have the name of the registered owner. It had not been reported stolen.

A busy killer, Shephard thought as he hung up. He walked to the Mustang and leaned against the black body, hot in the late morning sun. Looking across Coast Highway to the ocean that twinkled silver-blue on the horizon, Shephard took out his notebook and charted the killer's movements. Nine days ago, the man had mailed a Bible to Algernon from Sacramento. On Saturday, three days later, he had rolled Steinhelper and taken his wallet. Sunday, he arrived from Sacramento in Laguna on Greyhound line 52. By six Monday morning he had removed Algernon from the realm of the living. By seven he had checked into the *Hotel Sebastian*, washed up, paid in advance for three days, and left his can of turpentine and his stolen identification in the night-stand drawer. A very busy man.

Shephard realized with modest but welcome clarity that the stolen identification had been left behind on purpose. Good, he thought, our man is thinking of us.

By nine, Shephard figured, the suspect had left—just after Bruce Harmon, and just before Shephard himself, had arrived. At two o'clock he went to Forest Avenue Books, purchased the used Bible, possibly sat under the shade of one of the city's venerable eucalyptus trees as he penned the brief but terrifying note to Hope Creeley, then walked across the street to the post office and mailed the book. It had arrived at Creeley's mansion a day later.

One day after that, he had gone to Creeley and done what he said he would do, and the misery he made hers was considerable. Had he cut off her eyelids so she would have to watch? Shephard shivered.

Sometime before Monday at 2 P.M. he had found a car.

And sometime before Tuesday he had found a safe place to sleep.

He was working methodically, accurately, quickly. Working like he knew the city.

Shephard pulled the now-wrinkled Identikit sketch from his pocket and studied it under the glare of the sun. The wry, confident face studied him back.

Chapter 12

His father had insisted on an early lunch. The table of his Arch Bay Heights home was set for two, and the Reverend Wade Shephard, tanned and serene, was quick to offer his son a glass of white wine. Wade, by personal decree an alcoholic, no longer drank, but the wine was present at every meal as an invitation to guests and as a test for himself. The liquid splashed tunefully into the goblet; his father smiled. It was the reverend's smile, not the policeman's, Shephard thought as he sat down. As a boy he had been intrigued by his father's smile, its wariness and suspicion, its taunting secrecy. But the smile of Wade the Reverend was forgiving, warm, public.

„I apologize for the early hour, but I've got a wedding this afternoon,“ he said. „Two young people from the congregation, charming couple. How's the head, son?“

„Healing rapidly.“

„Good, good. Wouldn't hurt to lay off the booze,“ Wade said with encouragement. „You sounded pretty hammered the other night. It's so good to see you again, Tommy. What do you hear from Louise, anything?“

„A little. She moved into a friend's home in time for the peak tanning season. Malibu.“

Her friend was Robert Steckman, the movie producer, and his smooth voice returned to Shephard's ears as he sipped the wine. She's too beautiful to be unseen by this town, he had told Shephard at a party one night. Steckman had „found“ Louise at Bullock's Wilshire, where she worked, and they had developed a quick and cheerful friendship that Shephard mistrusted and felt excluded from. Too beautiful to be unseen, he thought. And now, a year later, Steckman had taken her into his Malibu home, undoubtedly to be seen.

„You sound bitter, son. A door is closed and a window opens. When you find a young woman whose soul is your soul, take her as a wife and love her with all your heart.“ Wade's voice was the same mellifluous, optimistic one that he used for his televised sermons.

Shephard nodded. „I did that,“ he said.

„Only a fool would close the window,“ his father said quietly.

„You haven't raised a fool.“

„No. I haven't.“ Wade sipped his coffee, and as his father lowered his face, Shephard saw a change of expression so subtle only a son might register it. For an instant, the face of Wade the Cop passed across the face of Wade the Reverend, like the shadow of a bird across water. Then it was gone and Wade looked up. „You know, I think that everything I've done in my life—from the time I married your mother and every day after she left us—I did in some way for her. Even before

I met her. Somehow I was acting for her, anticipating her. And judged by some standards, I have done wonderful things. The power of the Lord has given me a large congregation that grew from almost nothing. Do you remember the first sermon in that makeshift chapel that still smelled like popcorn? With Little Theodore sitting there in a sweat?" He paused, as he did on television, for effect. „Then a huge chapel in which to worship. And the beginnings of a hospital in Yucatan, where we can carry the mercy of God to those who need it most. And I have been given some beautiful things, too. A lovely house in a beautiful city, good friends, health. But you know something? I would trade it all to have her back with me.“

Wade brought a napkin to his mouth, patted, set it down on the table in front of him. Shephard poured himself another glass of wine. His father smiled.

„I think, of all the joys on earth, that the love shared by a man and a woman is most sacred, Tommy. And human, too. When I loved Colleen I told myself that it was the best of what I would ever do. I was your age when I thought that. And now, it's thirty years later and I feel the same thing. I would trade it all to have her back in this house with me. You'll never hear that in a Sunday sermon, or maybe you will, but it's true. The times we had, the laughter. Even the sorrow we shared..." Wade smiled again and it wasn't the public version, but a private reminiscence, a reverie about something fine.

Shephard felt like a man listening to an advertisement for something he couldn't buy. The image of Louise reclining on a Malibu sun deck flitted into his mind, followed by one of Jane Algernon standing in waders, aiming her lovely and hurtful smile across the yard at him.

„The hospital in Yucatan," he said, „will it be big?"

„Two hundred beds, Tommy. And the donations keep rolling in. We're about to break ground, and she's going to be beautiful. I decided to call it the Sisters of Mercy Hospital. Come back to the den, I'll show you the blueprints."

Wade led him from the dining room into the living room, then down the familiar hallway to the den. The presence of his old house, the home of his boyhood, brought back to Shephard a horde of memories that fought for attention all at once: walking down this same hallway in his baseball cleats and getting a wild bawling out by Wade; the same hallway where Pudgy, Shephard's beloved mutt, had scampered a million times and slammed into the wall, unable to negotiate the sharp turn to Shephard's bedroom; that bedroom, first on the right, where he had retreated to play with Christmas presents, cried at the first heartbreak of romantic love in the fourth grade, slept long and feverishly through the chicken pox, constructed out of cardboard his first motorcycle, stared through the window when the rain fell so hard in 1960 that three houses in the Heights had slipped into the street, and sat benumbed before the small television set the day of John Kennedy's funeral watching the motorcade labor through the streets—Hope Creeley had been right, the wind was foreign and merciless that day.

Even the smells seemed haunted: his father's invariable Sunday morning menu of pancakes, bacon, and eggs; the dank and muted smell of sulfur brought up in the water system; the undercurrent of saltwater that was always stronger in summer; the smell of dried eucalyptus leaves, Wade's favorite, which were always placed around the Shephard house in vases; even—and Shephard believed as they

stepped into the den that he could smell it still—the high-pitched stink of his father's bourbon.

As they went into the den, he realized that what was so strangely timeless about the old house was simply the obvious. Wade hadn't changed it in thirty years. No new paint, no new carpets, no drapes, no new furniture. Why hadn't he noticed it before, he asked himself. Because there was nothing to notice?

The Sisters of Mercy blueprint hung from the den wall by thumbtacks. Wade trained the beam from a track light—one new addition, Shephard noted—onto the smeared design and put on his glasses.

„Two stories and two hundred beds,“ he said proudly. „One hundred private, the rest in groups of four, six, and eight. A full maternity ward and pediatrics section because the birth rate in Mexico is phenomenal. The hospital itself will be on Isla Arenillas, south of Cozumel. Ten years ago, the villages around were nothing but a few huts and a Pemex station. Now they're towns. Five years from now they'll be wonderful little cities full of tourists who are going to pay good money and bring good business to places you've never even heard of yet. The Yucatan is going to be the new Mexican Riviera, and the Sisters of Mercy will be there to help.“ Wade turned to his son with a contented but oddly skewed grin. „I don't really know where I got the idea to do this. I just woke up one morning and that's what I wanted to do. I believe I was guided by the spirit in my decision. Strange, but I'd never even been to Mexico.“

„You've been guided a long way from home, pops.“

„A few years from now, I'll be gone and I'll have left four miracles behind me. A church and a hospital, a wife and a son. I'm proud of that. I think it's an honor to add something before you go.“

Wade glanced at his watch and flicked off the track light.

They returned to the dining room, where Shephard helped his father clear the table.

Through the sliding glass door that led to the backyard, Shephard watched the sea heave steadily into Arch Bay. The surging blue was broken only by the bright dabs of color that were his father's roses, a Wade passion for as long as he could remember. The rose bushes ran the entire length of the wide backyard. They had supplied Shephard with scores of gifts over the years. He remembered particularly a small bunch he had picked for Louise on the occasion of their first date, a mixed bouquet of reds and whites, which he augmented with bright yellow blossoms of sourgrass weed that grew unfettered in a far corner. She had been nearly ecstatic, and Shephard was moved by her reaction in a way that only a boy of sixteen can be. He thought back to that night as he set his wineglass in the sink. After going to bed he had mentally composed love poems to Louise, which he imagined turned into deep blue birds that flitted out of his room and winged through the night to her bedroom. And, too moved by emotion to sleep, he had left his room and gone into the backyard, where he faced in the direction of his beloved's home and spread his arms to draw in the telepathic poem-birds that she was assuredly sending back to him. He had maintained this dramatic pose for a few long minutes, convinced that the world had never known a love so pure and powerful. Pudgy had sat idiotically in front of him, head cocked, waiting for something to happen.

As he thought of Louise, he felt bad.

Those early years had seemed endless, he thought, setting the plates and a coffee saucer into the familiar sink. They had seemed endless, and then they vanished.

Wade filled the sink and began washing the dishes, and in automatic response to the years of teamwork that had made the Shephard house spotless, Tom took his time-honored position to his father's left. He dried. The view through the kitchen window was pristine. A bank of clouds wandered across the sun, casting a momentary darkness over the day and turning the shiny water to a dark blue. Cobalt blue, Shephard noted, like the flecks in Larry Robbins's microscope. He worked the Identikit sketch from his pocket and flattened it on the counter beside his father. Wade studied it, shook his head, looked again. „No.“

„Did you know Tim Algernon?“ Shephard asked.

Wade handed him a plate and nodded. „Hard to live in this town for thirty years and not know Tim. We played a little tennis together at the Surfside back after the war. Never friends, just acquaintances.“ His father's voice suddenly found an edge. „I heard it was pretty bad.“ He looked again at the sketch, then moved it aside.

„He didn't have a face. We had to run a dental on him just to make the identification.“

Shephard purposefully offered his father little information; Wade's line of questioning would reveal his own instincts on how to handle the case. There was a long silence as Wade rinsed the sink and doused it with cleanser. Then, as he had done a hundred times before, he wiped the counter once before swinging himself up onto the tiles, where he sat with his back to the ocean. Shephard dried the last of the silverware and hoisted himself likewise onto the opposite counter. His father's face had lost its warmth.

„Money?“

„That was my first thought. Until I found over a thousand dollars in bills stuffed down his throat. There was more in the house, and plenty of hardware someone might want.“ Shephard waited again.

„Then what does that leave?“

Shephard looked into the face of Wade the Cop. „An old detective friend of mine told me once that men get killed for four reasons. Money, a woman, silence, and revenge. Algernon didn't have a woman.“

Wade seemed to ponder the statement. Then: „Now do you understand why that old detective left that world for a better one?“

„I think so. But there must be silence and revenge in your world, too.“

His father grinned broadly. „We try to keep it to a minimum.“

„Algernon was killed early Monday morning. On Wednesday, Hope Creeley had a visit from the same man. He held her down in the bathtub and cut off her eyelids before torching her, and everything—“

„Cut off her eyelids?“

„The only way I can figure it is that he wanted her to watch,“ Shephard said.

His father shook his head. „I guess that's how I'd read it too,“ he said quietly.

„And the same guy did it. He sent Algernon a Bible with a threat written in it. The same for Creeley. The woman at Forest Avenue Books said the Identikit sketch matched her customer. She had him pegged for religion or self-help.“

„An astute observation, I'd say.“

„The connection between Algernon and Creeley is the Surfside Club. They were members at the same time, but it was a long time ago—“

„One connection, maybe,“ Wade interrupted. „I hope for your sake there's more than just that.“

„It's all I've got. Maybe Joe Datilla can open some doors.“

Wade's face seemed torn between professions: the suspicion of the detective and the gentle disappointment of the reverend both registered. „Joe will do everything he can for you,“ he said, and for a moment was lost in thought. „I can't think of two more opposite types. Algernon, as I remember, was a quiet man, big and strong, an athlete. Hope Creeley was married to Burton Creeley, who was part-owner of the club. She was a vivacious, very social woman before he died. Of course after that, she just seemed to fade away. I'm sure that living there at the Surfside was more than she could handle.“

„You knew about Helene?“

„Everyone knew about Helene Lang.“

„What happened to her?“

Wade looked down at his feet as they dangled by the cupboard. „Like Hope Creeley,“ he answered finally. „She just seemed to fade away. Left the club after a while, I think.“

„Where did she go?“

„I don't know, Tom. I quit going there after your mother passed away and it was quite a while before I had the desire to play tennis with the old gang again. So I lost touch. Just as well, I think. I'll tell you, after the war I came back from the Pacific, glad to be alive with a little peace in the world. A year or two later I met Colleen and I don't have to tell you that that was the happiest time of my life. The whole world seemed to breathe a big sigh of relief. People moved west to Southern California; the factories that were building planes went back to building station wagons, and it was wonderful. A whole country full of teenagers is what it felt like. Then a long run of, well, call it bad luck if you want. A strange feeling it was, sitting in the Surfside Lounge after Colleen and Burton. I guess the dream had to end. It felt like ... growing up, maybe. It sobered us. It aged us. It woke us up from a good sleep.“ Wade reached down and wiped the counter once with the towel. „It's still a hard time to talk about,“ he added as he slid off the counter and checked his watch.

„Thanks, pops,“ Shephard said.

„Hey.“ When he looked up, his face was full and flushed, a dose of the Reverend Wade Shephard. „I've got a couple of young lovers to marry. And when you're ready, I'll do it for you, too.“ He smiled broadly. „No charge.“

Chapter 13

Shephard sped north on Coast Highway toward the Surfside Club, helping himself to the vacant fast lane and holding the Mustang to a mild eighty. An

afternoon breeze had eased onto the coast, the first stirrings of a shift from low to high pressure. By evening the wind would hit seven knots, he guessed, frosting the sea with whitecaps and clearing the smog westward for a high-gloss sunset. He pictured himself sitting on the patio of the Hotel Laguna, working on a double Scotch in the company of Jane Algernon while the sun went down behind Catalina Island. Unlikely daydreams, he thought. But as Jane Algernon's sleeping figure passed across his mind he again felt that fluttering inside, the covey of quail gathering before flight. He savored the brief sensation, but forced his mind onto other things, telling himself not to surround molehills of emotion with mountains of meaning.

The all-news station featured an interview with a university psychologist, an expert in law enforcement, who posited that „not all police are the cold-blooded killing machines that many people think them to be.“ On the contrary, he told the interviewer, some undergo horrible traumas during and after fatal shootings. The nightmares, divorce, and eventual suicide of one such case were noted, and the summation was that people should have more compassion for the cop on the beat.

The report yanked Shephard back to that freakishly drizzly night last August. He had responded to a call from an officer in distress and arrived at the residential street off Pico Boulevard to find a cop being held at bay by a man with a knife. The scene played itself out again: Shephard cutting the lights of the unmarked car, cautiously approaching the two men framed in the headlights of a black and white, moving closer to see that the officer's hands were held out with the palms up. He could still hear the calm argument, something about whatever was wrong with the cockroaches didn't require a knife and maybe jail. Then the cop dropping his hands and the man with the knife dropping his for a moment before he swung upward in a quick arc and the officer went for his gun: Shephard could never clearly remember who moved first. He saw the short trajectory of the blade outlined in the headlights. Then the jerking of his right shoulder and the muzzle flash of the Python .357. And the roaring in his ears as the cop went down and the man pitched over backward onto the wet grass, all in a warm drizzle that cast a spectral sheen over the scene. Then that endless moment of indecision while he felt the urine spreading down his pants, and moved closer to see the officer on his knees, bent over, cradling a handful of his own insides, and the young man with only his foot moving and his chest turning dark in the rain. Looking down on him, Shephard saw that he was just a boy.

Shephard lit a cigarette to break the reverie, then pushed to a music station. The song was dreadful but helped to erase the vision of Morris Mumford from his mind. At night it was different. At night, Morris lived inside him and did as he pleased.

The traffic thickened as he approached Corona del Mar. By the time he reached the first traffic light, the cars had coalesced into an unmoving mass of colors, shining chrome, puffs of exhaust. Children bustled up and down the sidewalks, across the crosswalks, through the stationary traffic. They carried the accoutrements of beach kids: boogie boards, swim fins, portable radios, skateboards, blankets. Shephard watched a thin, tan boy with a sunbleached mop of hair bob down the sidewalk in front of him, the Tom Shephard of another

lifetime. He was carrying a pair of swim fins and a beach towel over his shoulder. Shephard called out over the door of the convertible: „Hey, how are the waves?“

The boy turned without breaking stride, shot Shephard the thumbs-up signal, then turned back to the bright sidewalk before him. Walk it all the way to Alaska, Shephard thought. His own pale reflection in the rearview mirror, cigarette dangling from under the drooped mustache, was the face of someone who no longer bore relation to the waves at Corona or to the boy on the sidewalk, he thought. Closer to the corpse in the bathtub, or the one in the dirt of Tim Algernon’s driveway. Closer to cigarettes. Closer to death. Closer to the middle, closer to the end. Maybe it was he who should walk to Alaska.

The light changed to green and the cars lurched forward to wait at the next one.

Ten minutes later he had emerged from the Corona del Mar snarl, opened up his speed past Newport Center and the office of South Coast Investigators, and eased down the long slope of highway to the bay bridge. The Balboa Bay Club slipped by to his left.

The first yellow apartments of the Surfside Club appeared to the west, dwarfed by high palm trees that tilted in the breeze. As he swung into the Surfside entrance and stopped at the guard house, Hope Creeley’s words found their way to his mind. Bad luck in the air at the Surfside. The guard was a trim man of about sixty, Shephard guessed. He stepped from the house with a humorless expression, a clipboard in his hand. Shephard smiled and noted that the guard’s holster was on his left hip but he held a pen in his right hand.

„Thinking about a suite,“ he said. „Like to have a look around.“ The guard perched himself over the car, bent down to have a look inside, then made a brief study of Shephard. „Tom Johnston is the name.“

„Appointment, Mr. Johnston?“

„Lease lines were busy all morning. Drove in from L.A. anyway. The city is driving me crazy.“

„Like that this time of year. Sign in, please.“ He passed Shephard the clipboard, who registered with a bogus Beverly Hills address and phone number. The guard—Shephard saw that his name was Arthur Mink—read the information and pointed behind the guard house. „Guest lot around and to your right. Have a nice visit, Mr. Johnston. The leasing office is next to the lounge on A Dock.“

Shephard followed the two-lane road around the guard house and along the flank of the Surfside convention room, where it opened onto a wide expanse of mostly empty parking spaces. The few cars there were clustered around the tennis courts. He put the Mustang between a Rolls-Royce Corniche and a black Seville, and as he swung open the door saw that all of the court marked 7 was taken up by Joe Datilla. The other courts around him were full and several patient players were waiting for their turn, but Datilla was on his alone, driving serves from a bucket of yellow balls at his feet. Shephard admired his precision: stoop for a ball, a breath and an arching of the back as he tossed up the target, a quick rotation of torso and arms as his legs straightened and the racquet rose to full extension, then snapped down. Follow through, return stance, a pleased nod as the ball screamed over the net and smacked into the far quadrant.

Shephard stood at the chain-link fence and witnessed two more serves before Datilla looked over his shoulder. His scowl turned to a smile.

„Tommy Shephard! I'll be damned.“ Racquet in hand, he came to the fence and swung open the gate. Datilla's handshake was firm and warm, the kind of handshake that says you're part of the team. „How's that head doing? You were a little drugged when I saw you last.“

„Just fine. That Scotch made it a little more palatable.“

„The least I could do.“ Datilla's eyes searched Shephard's face for a brief moment. Shephard noticed that he wasn't sweating. „What brings you to the Surfside? Everything okay?“

„I'm fine, but my city's a little on the nervous side. Two murders in one week. Broke all records.“

Datilla sighed. „All I can say is I'm glad I'm not in your business. Any good leads?“

„Let's talk a minute, Joe.“

Datilla moved his racquet to the other hand and pointed to the bench by the fence. „You got it, Tom. Anything I can do.“

They sat down, Datilla pulling a maroon windbreaker over his suntanned body, Shephard lighting a cigarette. Datilla looked like a man who could afford to be good to himself, Shephard thought, and was.

„The victims are Tim Algernon and Hope Creeley,“ Shephard began. „They used to play tennis here. Did you know them?“

„Very well. Hope was married to my partner, Burton. Tim and his wife Margie were charter members. We opened just before the end of the war.“

„Did they know each other?“

„Oh sure. Small group then. Your father and mother were with us. Good times.“

„Were they involved?“

Datilla brushed a hand through his silver hair. His eyes were blue and perplexed when it came away.

„In what?“ he asked.

„Each other.“

The perplexity turned to relief. „No.“ He smiled. „Not those two. Tim was dedicated to his wife. Straight shooter all the way. Hope was very much in love with Burton, too. They had their differences, but I don't think Tim Algernon was one of them.“

„Enemies, jealousies, rivals? Anyone who didn't like them?“

Datilla propped the racquet against the bench and slowly shook his head. „You know, Tom, after the war we got together here whenever we could. Hard play, hard drink, nothing but fun. Believe me, we'd earned it. Any rivalries we had were settled right on these courts. Skin-deep rivalries, nothing more than that. And forgotten in the lounge when the beer started flowing. Sorry, no.“

Shephard was suddenly aware of the threadbare line of investigation that had led him to this point. Two dead people, each members of the same tennis club nearly thirty years ago. Datilla seemed to read his thoughts. He took up the racquet again, twirled it in his hand, waited for Shephard's next question.

„Whoever killed Algernon and Creeley didn't do it for money. He's left plenty of property behind in both houses. The killer threatened them both. He's doing what he says he'll do. Algernon was an older man who ran a stable and bet a little on the horses. Creeley was a civic-minded gal who stayed inside with a dog that

couldn't bark. Algernon tried to warn her. Called twenty-four times and got a machine. I don't get it. Why would someone want to do that to an old woman like Hope Creeley?"

Datilla stared at the cement. He zipped up the wind-breaker, then slowly unzipped it, his hand performing the action disconsolately, automatically. „I've been asking myself those same questions since I first heard about Tim.“ Datilla's eyes were moist. „Tommy, I can't imagine a reason. The harder I try, the less I believe it's happened. Maybe the killer picked out the two people who deserve it least. Is that a lead?“ He smiled weakly and shook his head.

Shephard stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray beside the bench and inquired casually if Datilla had any doubt that Burton Creeley had drowned.

„Not after I saw him in the morgue,“ he answered.

„By accident, I mean,“ Shephard corrected. „There was speculation in the papers, Joe, that it was more than an accident.“

Joe Datilla's face darkened, but his blue eyes stayed cool, controlled. „Third-rate theories from fourth-rate newspapers, Tom. You've got to know how that works, after all the press you got last summer.“ His voice had heated. „Those bastards will print anything that takes up space. I resent what they implied when Burton died, and I'll never forgive our wonderful free press for that. It taught me a lot, though. Like keep your mouth shut. The week after Nixon resigned there were rumors in the papers that he was staying here on my boat, PRICELESS. Not true. But I wouldn't let the press in here to see for themselves, and they took me for part of a cover-up. Personal grudge, sorry.“

Shephard nodded. Then: „Burton was cheating on his wife.“

Datilla met Shephard's gaze with a deadpan expression, his eyes steady and calm. „Burt Creeley was a man of endless energy and enthusiasm,“ he said. „And some of those energies found regrettable outlets. Tom, I always thought he was foolish to risk what he had with Hope, but another man's business is just that. The woman he was seeing was sick. A slut. Nymph.“

Datilla explained how Miss Helene Lang's application for membership had slipped by him. He usually screened the applicants, especially those applying to live at the Surfside, personally. Somehow, the beautiful and rapacious Helene had slipped in under the door. It was only after a time that she began to show her „true colors.“ Datilla said that after seeing what they were, he'd tried his best to stay away from Helene Lang.

„A man who can't control himself is a fool and a danger to himself,“ Datilla said. „I've seen a few get swallowed up by their own accidents. No one's perfect, Tom, but I could never see Burton and her ... besides the fact she was built nice and knew how to show it off. Hope was lovely, too. There's a line you have to draw when what you risk is worth more than what you're getting. A sense of proportion. You don't bet a hundred to win fifty. Burton didn't make little mistakes like most of us. Too sharp. He must have saved them all up for a big one. Helene Lang was it.“

„And did it cost him?“

„It must have. It cost his wife more, which was sad. And she handled it like the class act she was. Tremendous woman.“ Joe sighed again and twisted the racquet in his hands.

„She thought highly of you, too. Called you several times before she died, didn't she?“

Datilla glanced up, his face in a look of stiff amusement. „Oh? Well, of course, but how...“

Shephard explained the diary, while Datilla's face softened.

„Yes, naturally. Must be very interesting to read.“

„Where did Helene go, when it was all over?“

„She was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. Then she went back home. New England, I think it was.“ Datilla gazed pensively at the strings of his racquet, as if Helene Lang might materialize from the empty squares.

The silence became awkward, and Shephard let it stand. But again he felt his line of questioning double back on itself, forming a circle, a zero. Datilla was as cooperative as he could want. Why wouldn't something give? He watched a woman walk onto the balcony of a third-story penthouse, shake a beach towel, then disappear back through a sliding glass door.

„It's out of proportion, Joe,“ Shephard said listlessly, more to himself than to Datilla. „Like you say.“

„What's that, the club?“ Datilla followed Shephard's gaze to the penthouse.

„No, the killing. There's no sense of balance. It isn't formed correctly. It's like that bet in poker you talked about. Too much for too little. Unless we're talking about stakes that aren't on the table yet.“

„It looks that way, doesn't it?“

„What do you get for the penthouse, Joe, ocean view?“

„Two thousand a month, plus membership and dues. That's the basic. You can write your own ticket from there but it only goes one way.“

„A sweet few acres here, Joe.“

„Seventy-five in all. Where else in Newport Beach can you find a parking lot with room in it?“

„A smart buy, the club.“

„Tommy, I'll tell you something about this club. But while I do it, I want you to see something that I think you're going to appreciate. Come with me, let's take a little walk.“

Datilla led them past the other courts, which were alive with players, shouts, the hollow pop of racquets hitting balls. He waved and nodded, and Shephard noticed that many of the players watched them walk by, their expressions locked into those reverential near smiles reserved for the rich.

„You say the club was a smart buy,“ Datilla began. „But what it really was was a lucky buy. I was just a shade over twenty when I came back from France and the war. I had two loves—tennis and cars—and my dream was to make enough money to give me both. A year later, I had a club and it was called the Surfside.“ Datilla paused to smile at a lovely brunette in a tennis skirt. She smiled back at him, then at Shephard. Maybe it is who you know, he thought abstractedly.

„Real estate was cheap then, so cheap you'd laugh if I told you what my first ten acres here cost. I didn't have a leg to stand on financially, but some friends arranged a loan through the bank. Collateral was my tennis racquet, I guess. Started with a clubhouse and a few courts, and when the membership began to pick up, I sunk what money I could into more land.“

Datilla pointed ahead as they walked. Shephard followed his hand to the sprawl of apartments that loomed in the near distance. „All that was just bayfront sand,“ he said proudly. „And finally I bought it all up. By 1948 I had so many people joining this club I was turning them away, and still building as fast as I could to accommodate them. So I got my tennis, Tommy. Smart buy? Maybe. But I think that luck was a big part. Keeping this place going is harder than getting it built. When you accumulate things, you accumulate worry. I’ve lived by one philosophy since the club was built. I don’t take chances. I cover my bets and play conservative. It’s more important to protect what you have than to reach out for more, don’t you think?“

„Right on, Joe,“ Shephard answered, wondering if there were enough common ground in their two ways of life to merit any understanding of Joe Datilla’s philosophies. He thought of his ransacked apartment, comparing it to Datilla’s Surfside.

The tennis area ended at a tall wing of apartments on the left and a large open patio to the right. Centered in the patio was an Olympic-sized swimming pool, in which a solitary swimmer—an older woman by the looks of her—churned methodically down the middle lane. They followed a walkway past the pool and its bright yellow deckside furniture, a tennis pro shop, an open-air lounge. The bar was already littered with afternoon drinkers, dressed in tennis clothes and chatting energetically. Shephard thought it looked like a commercial for something—beer, or the good life, maybe.

Then came the men’s and women’s spas, a low building surrounded by the unmistakable odor of sweat, steam, disinfectant. They turned hard right at the end of the men’s locker rooms and descended a short flight of stairs that ended in a pair of blue doors. Datilla fumbled for his keys with one hand, but the other found the door open. He held it for Shephard and stepped inside.

The first thing that appeared out of the darkness was a tiny, poorly lit stand at the far end. Sitting under the single hanging lamp was a blue-uniformed guard, apparently reading. The door thudded shut behind him, then the entire underground cavern flashed alive with light. He felt Datilla’s hand on his arm, guiding them toward glittering automobiles.

„My other love,“ Datilla’s voice continued behind him. „My true loves, my wives, my concubines, my children. These are my babies, Tom. Thirty-eight of them, counting the Sportster I use around town.“

„Ah. The collection. I’ve heard about this.“

They stopped. Shephard felt in need of a tour guide. Most of the cars were foreign, strange machines that he had rarely seen on the road, all polished to a frenzy of color and chrome. He recognized a Ferrari Boxer, a vintage Mustang convertible much like his own, an Alfa Romeo Veloce, but that was all. The rest evaded description.

„I could tell you about the Mondial over there in the far corner,“ Datilla said. „Or the Maserati here on the left, or the Silver Shadow in the middle there. But I’m not into cars for what they’re worth, I love them for what they are. I’ve got a ‘seventy Honda mini-car buried out there somewhere, a beautiful little machine that gets about sixty miles on a gallon of gas and corners like a go-kart. I’ve got a homely old Rambler here because at times I feel like a homely old man. There’s a new RX-

7 on the far side; it's a car that a million people own and a classic since it first came out of Japan. A car for every mood, Tom. They're here to impress nobody but me. I love them all the same, too."

Shephard gazed out over the cars.

"I've got a full-time guard to watch them, but not full-time enough," Datilla said. "Believe it or not, I lost one Monday morning. Somebody came right in and took it. Broke my heart. A red Coupe de Ville convertible, pristine and fun as hell to hit the town in on a summer night. Gone. Hope they find it soon."

"What year?" Shephard asked, warming to a possibility.

"Nineteen sixty-four."

"Monday morning you said? Late or early?"

"Must have been late. I tracked down the guard a day later and chewed his ass good. He said he left for an hour because he needed to go to the bank. Should have fired old Mink, I suppose. Didn't even lock up. Shit, can you imagine?"

"Do you remember the plates, Joe?"

"Gave it to the Newport cops Wednesday. Hold on."

"I'll keep a special eye out."

Shephard watched as Datilla disappeared into the sea of cars, working his way to the tiny guard hut in the far corner. The timing was right, he thought. The car stolen Monday morning late, in time for a stop by Forest Avenue Books. But why hadn't it shown on the Stolen printout from Sacramento? Datilla came back with a grubby slip of paper, which he handed to Shephard, and the answer was clear: IAEA 896. Different plates, different car. Just another finger pointing to the Surfside. Were they all coincidence? He pocketed the slip anyway, out of habit. Datilla thanked him profusely for the personal attention. Shephard showed the Identikit. Datilla looked for a long moment, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Tom. Kind of looks like anybody, you know? Anyway, I've bored you with my enthusiasms. Let's get up where the sun still shines." Datilla locked the doors behind them, and checked them twice.

The sunlight was dazzling.

"How about a tour of the club, Tom? Plenty you haven't seen."

Shephard offered his hand. "Joe, buddy, you've been a tremendous help. If you don't mind, I'll wander around a bit, then head back."

Datilla looked slightly disappointed, but rallied. "Fine, young man. Tell your father hello for me. And watch yourself around here, plenty of young ladies to get you in trouble. If any mention a taste for a distinguished gentleman of the older persuasion, give my number quick." Datilla pumped his hand, then turned and headed back toward the courts.

Shephard waited a moment, then backtracked to the walkway that led past the pool. The woman was still swimming; she stopped at the end of a lap and smiled at him, then pushed off.

The walkway ended at A Dock, where tinny Hawaiian music issued from the lounge. He stepped onto the wooden docking, feeling the gentle sway of the structure, watching the huge yachts dipping and rising slowly overhead. The sunlight blared off their white hulls. He squinted and read the names: PRICELESS, Datilla's vessel; INTERCEPTOR, MARYBETH, COMEBACK. Above him, he watched a crewman dangle a broom over the hull of PRICELESS and

scrub an invisible blemish. Keeping a ship like that clean isn't a job, he thought, it's a career.

Then, as surely as he was studying the yachts, Shephard knew that someone was studying him. The feeling came, passed, came again. When he turned to look over his shoulder, the woman from the swimming pool, dripping wet and balancing a highball in her hand, was looking at him from the A Dock lounge.

He turned back and meandered down to the lesser vessels of B Dock.

Footsteps on the wood, the clapping of sandals not in a hurry. Then a gruff woman's voice behind him. „Looking to buy?“ it asked.

Shephard turned to face a pair of washed-out gray eyes, a deeply creased face, a head of dripping black and gray hair, two large bosoms. The highball tinkled in her hand and the scar on her wrist was obvious. „Not exactly,“ he said.

„I'm Dorothy Edmond. I used to own a Ditmar Donaldson ninety. John Wayne told me it was the only ship on the water he liked better than the GOOSE.“

„That's very nice.“

„Don't bore me, young man. Phonies always bore me.“

She cracked a shrewd but not unfriendly smile. „I've seen more of the world than you dream of and I'd go back for seconds if I had the time.“ He noticed that the eyes were red-rimmed and that her breath carried more alcohol than was missing from one highball. „Now, let me guess. You're a captain looking for a ship?“

„No.“

„A mate looking for a captain?“

„No again.“

„A tennis hustler looking for a match?“

„No.“

„How about a dick named Tom Shephard wondering why two old-timers from the Surfside got burned up?“

He studied Dorothy Edmond's red-rimmed gray eyes, which said nothing back.

„Oh damn,“ she said suddenly, looking behind her down the dock. Joe Datilla was hustling toward them, tennis racquet in hand, cursing the crew of the PRICELESS as he went by. „Forget what I just said for a half hour. Then call me.“

Datilla was dripping sweat. Must have been some bucket of balls, Shephard thought. He smiled quickly at Shephard, then turned his aggravated face to Dorothy. „Dot, trouble with Bank of Newport. Barnes and Kaufman are on their way here for bad news on the Carlsbad escrow. Meet them when they get here, keep them out of my hair for an hour while I run some figures. They're due at three. Hustle up, please, honey. I told you about this yesterday, dear.“

„Oh, Joe, tell them to go home.“ She beamed, twirling the drink.

„That's ten minutes,“ he said quickly. „Go to, Dorothy. I need your persuasive skills.“

She upped the glass and got only ice. „Just when I thought I had a young buck interested in my old bones. I'll get you for this, Joe Datilla.“

Datilla grinned as Dorothy broke away and climbed the ramp back to the lounge. „Sorry, Tommy, these things come up. Anything I can show you?“

„Sorry to be in the way, Joe. I've got to head back. Just wanted a look at the fabled A Dock.“

Datilla walked him toward the guard gate, most of the way in silence.

„I hope Dorothy didn't shake you up too bad. She's a great gal, but the liquor reaches the danger limit by about noon. Apt to say some pretty irresponsible things sometimes. Been social director here from way back.“

„No problem, really.“ They shook hands again before Datilla veered hurriedly off toward the A Dock lounge.

Shephard was met by a red-vested valet at the guard house. He described his car and handed over the keys. Mink, he noticed, was still on duty, sitting alone on a stool. Shephard approached and offered a cigarette, which Mink accepted.

„Find a place?“ the guard asked.

„Had a long talk with Joe. No openings, but I'll wait.“ Shephard lit a cigarette of his own, and decided to go fishing. „By the way, he asked me to tell you that Barnes and Kaufman canceled.“

Mink responded wonderfully, reaching immediately for the clipboard. „Who?“

„Barnes and Kaufman, Bank of Newport. They were set for three.“

„Not through this gate they weren't.“

So Joe Datilla didn't like Tom Shephard and Dorothy Edmond together, Shephard thought. And why hadn't he fired Mink, anyway?

„Never mind, I must have gotten the message wrong... Joe told me he got a Cadillac stolen Monday. Bad news when the thieves find their way into a club like this.“

The guard shook his head and slammed down the clipboard. „Easy stealin' a car with no guard to watch it,“ he said flatly.

„Heard the guard had some banking,“ Shephard said optimistically, careful to attach no blame.

„Banking nothing,“ said Mink. „Joe told me to take the day off. It was my shift in the garage. Miss a day and lose a car. What luck. But the boss says jump, I ask how high. I needed a day off anyway. Who doesn't? Hell, he signs the paychecks.“

The valet arrived with Shephard's car, screeching to a stop in the outbound lane beside the guard house.

Shephard tipped the boy heavily, lost in speculation. He turned south on Coast Highway, back toward Laguna, and stopped at the first pay phone he could find. At the end of half an hour, Dorothy Edmond time, he dialed her number. He was surprised to find her listed. The whiskey voice at the other end was unmistakable.

„Yes?“

„Dorothy Edmond, Tom Shephard.“

„Who?“

„Tom Shephard. Just talked to you there at the club.“

„I'm sorry but you didn't. I've been sitting in this apartment all day. Are you a crank?“

Shephard wanted a minute to consider the possibilities, but he didn't want to lose her.

„No, honey,“ he answered quickly. „Are you?“

She hung up.

He listened for a moment for any signal of intrusion on the line, but heard none.

When he called back, the line was busy, and when the operator broke in for him, she got only static. Off the hook, she said. Try later?

Chapter 14

Chief Hannover was pissed. His voice over the office line was shrill, and when Shephard found him at his desk he was sitting upright, wide-eyed, and had managed to gnaw the end of a yellow pencil down to wood. He kicked out a chair to Shephard and slid backward in his own. Hannover was dressed as usual in an expensive suit that looked cheap on him, a three-piece gray silk outfit that seemed to shine, troutlike, at the wrong places. He leaned back to reveal dark crescents of sweat seeping onto the armholes of the vest. His hair, slightly too long, was held in place with spray. When Shephard sat, Hannover pounced on his desk intercom and ordered Cadette Annette to hold all calls for „one quarter of an hour.“ This done, he slid again on his chair, eyeing Shephard.

„I'll have to lapse into the colloquial in order to get my point here across with as much brevity as possible,“ he said, then fumbled in the box on his desk for a cigarette. Shephard lit it, and one for himself. Hannover squared himself in the chair. „We are fucked. Mayor Webb called me at home last night and we had a long talk. God, can that woman talk. To put it bluntly, Shephard, she's terrified, both personally and professionally. She herself received“—Hannover broke off the sentence to scoot forward, pick up a slip of paper, and wave it at Shephard— „thirty-six telephone calls between nine and noon today. All from horrified citizens wanting to know what is happening in their quaint little seaside town. And in turn, she asked me that same question. Shephard, you're familiar with the fate of Inca bearers of bad news?“

„They were beheaded.“

„I felt quite like one of those unfortunates today when I tried to explain to her that we haven't even established a motive as yet. Luckily, we've progressed as a civilization since the times of beheadings. Instead, there has been a subtle improvement, which allows the offending messengers to erect a temple of truth or a cloud of smoke, as necessary, to trumpet or obscure their position. Of course you know what I'm talking about, don't you?“

„A press conference.“

Hannover drew deeply on his cigarette, then looked at it. His voice was deep and smoke-choked. „You're going to handle it, Shephard. Two of the three networks are sending news crews, the *Times*, *Register*, *Pilot*, and all the local papers will be there. You don't look happy.“

„I don't like reporters. And they don't like me.“

„I can understand that. But as detective in charge, you are the best man for the job.“

„What about Pincus in Community Relations? It is his job...“

„No one believes Pincus,“ Hannover said glumly. The Community Relations Office had been his idea, a „liaison between the department and the community it serves.“ But the recently hired Pincus had turned out to be lazy, happy, and deeply indecisive, turning calls over to the chief rather than fending for himself.

„The *Times* won't even talk to him anymore. So it's your show, Shephard. I know the press kicked you around a little up in L.A., but I'll tell you right now that the Orange County press is a different animal. Not so ... carnivorous,“ he said, pleased with his word choice. He smiled at Shephard briefly. „I want to give you some basic parameters between which you should stay.“

While Hannover talked about parameters, Shephard's mind wandered back to reporter Daniel Pedroza of the *Times*, who had hounded him so thoroughly after the shooting. He had become like a shadow, waiting for Shephard outside the station when he arrived at work, lingering in the parking lot at quitting time, tying up his phone line with innumerable calls, filing a mountain of stories. The stories called the integrity of Shephard and of the entire department into question. When Shephard quit returning the calls and refused further interviews, Pedroza had even showed up at his house one night. In fact, the night after Louise had said she was leaving him, and Pedroza had asked if they might talk about some „more personal aspects“ of his post-shooting trauma. Shephard had hurled a near-empty wine bottle at the reporter, then read the next day of his „violently irrational“ behavior. Pedroza hadn't mentioned the wine bottle.

Even Daniel Pedroza, however, was no match for the ACLU lawyer who had grilled Shephard at the inquest. The attorney had implied that the murder of Shephard's mother had stamped upon him a deep and malevolent hatred for „alleged criminal types.“ Deep in the bowels of L.A.'s City Hall, sweltering in the late September heat, Shephard's heart had pounded with such anger that he was sure it was being picked up by the reporters' tape recorders.

„Are we clear on those?“ Hannover was asking. „Play them back, Shephard. It's important we present a united front at this point in time.“

„Stress that the killings of Algernon and Creeley may be connected, or may not be. We don't want to arouse any more fears than we have to. Don't mention the threats, the eyelids, or the voice on the answering machine because we need something to use on a suspect. Stress again that the force has redoubled its efforts, and that a task force is working around the clock to bring a suspect under arrest. Remain calm, polite, and assured at all times. Pass out the Identikit sketches in case any of the local papers haven't seen them. And insist on makeup for my forehead because I'm sure to sweat under the lights.“

Hannover nodded with approval throughout the litany, then smiled and leaned back again in his chair.

„You've got a mind like a steel trap, young man,“ he said finally. „And remember you're representing the city of Laguna Beach, home of the Festival of Arts. The conference is set for four, so you've got about five minutes to get handsome. Just like your father, Shephard, you're going to be a TV star.“

The conference room was already steaming in the raw glare of the television lights when Shephard walked in. He sat down at the end of a long table, declined makeup, and broke into a sweat. Danny Pedroza sat down next to him.

„Thought I left you in L.A.,“ Shephard said.

„I thought I'd left you there, too.“ Pedroza looked at Shephard's head. „Somebody hit you with a wine bottle?“

„Just a hangover.“

„I’ve been trying to get a job in Orange County for three years. You know, sun and waves and pretty girls on every corner. None of this kind of crap.“

Shephard studied Pedroza’s smooth, youthful face, the short black hair, the pearly grin. „Me, too. But people keep killing each other and reporters keep asking questions. No end to it, I guess.“

One of the young cadettes walked into the conference room, drawing stares and a cumbersome silence as she came to Shephard and plopped a stack of Identikit sketches down on the table. When she left, Pedroza leaned closer. „What’s this about the eyelids being snipped?“ he asked in a whisper.

„News to me,“ Shephard said out loud, looking straight ahead. Where do they find out this stuff, he wondered.

„You denying it?“

„I never said it.“

„Is it true?“

Shephard considered his response as Hannover’s parameters dissolved in his mind. „What if it were?“

„Then I’d like us to print it.“

„The chief wouldn’t, Danny. We need something for the suspects to choke on.“

„I can respect that.“

„Would you?“

„I respected that wine bottle.“ Pedroza paused, then leaned closer again. „Both off?“

The NBC director was motioning for Shephard to stand, snapping his fingers and checking his light meter. Shephard nodded to Pedroza, returned the glare of the lights as best he could, then stood.

Looking out at the conference room, he saw only the blizzard of lights, hot and relentless, and heard the clicking of tape recorders, the shuffle of pens and pads. Shephard began his briefing, talking to the faceless crowd before him.

„Monday at six A.M. a routine Laguna police patrol discovered the body of Tim Algernon outside his home on Laguna Canyon Road,“ he heard himself drone. Good, he thought, maybe they’ll all fall asleep. „The Orange County Coroner’s office reported later that day that Mr. Algernon had expired from severe hemorrhaging in the skull caused by trauma. The trauma was caused by a rock.“ Shephard continued to stare into the camera, careful not to wipe his face with his hand, as he was tempted. „The body was then doused with common turpentine and set on fire. Three days later, on Thursday at approximately three P.M., the body of Mrs. Hope Creeley, age sixty-three, was discovered in her Laguna Beach home. Mrs. Creeley was pronounced dead by reason of severe burns early the next day by the coroner. Certain similarities that have occurred in the two cases open up the possibility that the murders may have been the act of one man.“ Hannover’s absurd „parameter“ rang somewhere in the back of Shephard’s echoing brain. „But it is not our opinion at this time that the murders are definitely connected.“ He heard a low groan issue from the glare to his right, followed by a grumble from the other side of the table.

„Investigation has led us to believe that the suspect is a white male, age sixty, medium height and slight build. Eyes are blue and hair is gray, worn longish, and a beard. He may be driving a 1964 Cadillac Coupe de Ville, convertible, red. The

plates are one-five-six DSN. At this point we have not established a motive. Questions?”

The voices blasted at him chaotically, like leaves blown by wind. They tangled all at once, repeated, dissipated to a few, then singled to one that issued from just behind the camera.

„Do you believe the same person is responsible for both murders?”

„We’re not sure. There is a possibility.”

The same voice: „How good is that possibility?”

„There are indications for and against. Speculation would be premature.”

Then a woman’s voice, harsh and hurried: „Then it’s possible that there are two maniacs running around this town burning people to death?”

„We haven’t ruled that out,” Shephard said, nearly choking on the idea.

A new voice: „Was Mrs. Creeley sexually assaulted?”

„No.”

„Was Mr. Algernon?” A grumble from the reporters.

„No.”

The first voice: „You say no motive has been established. Can you tell us what motives have been ruled out?”

„Robbery. Substantial amounts of property were left at both scenes. No property that we know of has been taken.”

The woman again: „Then in the absence of apparent motive, we may be talking about thrill killing?”

„That is a possibility.”

A young man’s voice: „Mr. Shephard, do you have a witness to either murder?”

„No.”

„Where did you get the description of the suspect and his car?”

„I can’t reveal that at this time.” Shephard felt a fat bead of sweat travel down his forehead toward his nose. Should have taken the makeup, he thought. The lights in front of him burned into his eyes. No wonder they use bright lights for interrogation.

„Is the car stolen?” Good question, Shephard thought.

„We believe so.” Then why no record in Sacramento?

„Was the rock that killed Algernon thrown or driven into his head manually?”

„Driven manually,” Shephard answered.

Then the first voice: „Did Mr. Algernon and Mrs. Creeley know each other?”

„Yes.” There was another rush of questions, which finally filtered down to one. His eyes burned.

„Do you believe they were involved in any illegal activity?”

„No, we do not.”

The harsh woman’s voice again: „Romantically? Were they involved with each other romantically?”

„No. They were friends at one time.”

„What time was that?”

„Still friends, I mean. Friends for a long time.”

„Do you think that this may be the work of more than one man?”

„We believe the suspect acted alone. It is possible that he had help.”

The young voice: „What kind of help?”

„We have no evidence; it is simply not ruled out at this time.“

„Do you think it is significant that both victims lived alone?“

„It is harder to kill two people than it is to kill one, if that’s what you mean.“

„Not exactly.“

Then a woman’s voice, harsh and fast, from the back of the room: „Detective Shephard, isn’t it true that you resigned from the Los Angeles Police Department after the fatal shooting of Morris Mumford last year?“

Shephard stared lamely in the direction of her voice. „Yes, that is true.“

Her voice again: „I’d like to know if the subsequent trauma of that shooting and resignation has in any way affected your handling of this case.“

The room was so quiet Shephard could hear the whirring of tape inside the camera, or was it the whirring of blood inside his head? He silently cursed the woman, the light, himself. The silence was lasting too long.

„Of course not.“

Her voice shot back quickly: „What about stress? I’m curious if stress has in any way impaired your search for what is obviously a single and very single-minded killer.“ Jesus, he thought, who is she?

„Stress? No, I don’t think it has.“

She was on him again. „We appreciate your avid concern for the facts, detective, but I’d like to know about your feelings. This is a small town whose murder rate has quadrupled in one week. The cases are being handled by a very young detective who was recently forced to resign from a larger and more potent force. What are your feelings now? What about your fears and doubts, Detective Shephard. Do you have any?“

The drop of sweat found its way to his nose. He wiped it with what grace he could muster, then stared toward the voice as the lights bore into his eyes. He heard the door open and quietly close. His mind began to eddy: How was Cal’s swollen eye? How much vacation time did he have after two months on the job? Was the table below him real wood or wood-look? He thought of Jane. Then he heard himself talking, slowly, conversationally, as if to a friend over the telephone.

„Fears and doubts? Sure, I’ve got the same fears and doubts you’d have if you walked into a bathroom and found a dead person in the bathtub. It scares you. It makes you feel cursed and unclean, like you want to take a long shower or swim way out in the ocean. And you doubt if the same man did the same thing the next night in the next house that you’d get there in time to prevent it. There’s enough fear and doubt to choke on for a lifetime. As far as why I’m running this investigation, well, it’s my job. I work here. That’s all.“

Shephard nodded once to the cameras, then sat back down, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. Pedroza whispered „Bitch“ in his ear, then stood and disappeared. Shephard’s eyes reeled from the lights. Blue dots spun and expanded, so clear and bright that they seemed real enough to reach out and touch. He clumsily removed a cigarette and someone lit it for him. A few of the reporters gathered in front of him, helping themselves to copies of the Identikit sketch, respectfully quiet. Then a stocky young blonde was standing in front of him, slipping a reporter’s notebook into her purse and staring down.

„Tina Trautwein,“ she said, „*Daily Pilot*. I hope I didn’t get too personal. Our paper believes in getting deeper than the headline.“ Then she turned with a swirl

of light hair and muscled her way through the other reporters to the door. But Shephard never saw her go through it, buried as she was by an orb of bright blue light.

The technicians broke down the lighting tripods while the director ordered them to Algernon's Riding Stables for an „on-location background intro.“ The director lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall while his crew scrambled. „Tough job, eh, kid?“

„Beats washing cars,“ Shephard said without forethought.

He brought an Identikit sketch to the table in front of him and buried himself in it. The last of the reporters filed out. The face seemed pleased by the way the conference had gone: it looked up at him with a wry smile that seemed to say, „Well, Shephard, I'm so happy to hear about your fears and doubts. Wouldn't you like to know what's next?“

Next, he thought. Damn.

The door closed and the room was quiet. Finally. Peace and quiet. Then he was aware of someone sitting at the far end of the table, just on the fringe of his returning field of vision. He looked at her, then to the side, as he would at night to see a distant road sign. A young woman in a light blouse, tan arms, dark hair. Shephard rubbed his eyes and sighed, prepared for neither the wrath nor the icy beauty of Jane Algernon.

„I came to see you,“ she said. After the pressing voices of the reporters, her tone sounded subdued, reasonable, even pleasant.

„To sue me?“

„To thank you. For ... helping me break through. I don't have a lot of people I talk to on a regular basis, so I'd kept a lot of things inside where they turned bad. You saw that, and I thank you for, well, for seeing it.“

Across the table her eyes looked bright blue, and it wasn't the flash dot any more.

„You should have held a press conference,“ he said wearily. „They would have seen it.“

Jane Algernon neither smiled nor spoke. She set a purse on the table and brought out an envelope, then a small box, which she slid down the table to Shephard.

In the envelope he found Tim Algernon's bank statement, another snapshot of him, and a letter written to „Rita.“ The box contained a tooth of some kind, yellowed, small, not sharp.

„Buster dropped it,“ she said. „He's still a pup. The California Indians considered the teeth of the sea lion to be good luck. Good luck to you from Buster and me.“

The change in Shephard's spirit was fundamental: he could feel something coming into him, other things going out.

„I let myself into your conference,“ she continued. „But when that woman started asking questions, I wished I hadn't. You handled it rather well. You said you wanted to go swimming in the ocean when you saw Hope Creeley. I knew what you meant because I do that every night. I swim in the ocean.“ She stood up and walked to the door. She shifted her purse from one shoulder to the other, then back again. „I guess I could stand here all day and move this silly thing around,

couldn't I? What I mean is, I swim at Diver's Cove at nine every night, and if you'd like to swim tonight I'd ... I wouldn't mind the company."

Shephard considered her loveliness, her rage, her strength, her pain, her invitation. As he looked at her, the list went on and on.

"I'd love to be the company," he said finally, and then she was gone.

The California DMV in Sacramento had unsnarled its computer jam sometime during Shephard's press conference. Pavlik had left a note on his desk in his inimitably cramped, precarious handwriting. The registered owner of the car bearing plates 156 DSN was Dick Moon of 4887 S. Coast Highway in Laguna Beach.

Shephard pocketed the note and slipped out the back entrance of the station, watching—out of habit it seemed by now—for Daniel Pedroza loitering near the Mustang. But his car was unattended, and he was relieved as he pushed it into gear and backed from the shade of an olive tree into the fierce Laguna sun.

Ten minutes later he drove into the parking lot of Moon Chevrolet and parked beside a new Camaro. The dealership owner was a portly man wearing a polka dot shirt with a collar so wide it looked like wings. He introduced himself as Dick Moon.

"Lot of people think we named this place after the moon," he said with a bright smile. "But Moon is me. Now, what can I get you into, young man?"

Moon's grin disappeared when Shephard expressed interest in an aging Cadillac with the plates 156 DSN. He waddled ahead of Shephard, leading them back to the sales office, where he consulted a logbook. Moon ran his fat finger down the column and shook his head.

"Got no such car on the lot. We got a sixty-nine Valiant with those plates, no Caddy."

"I'd like to see it," Shephard said.

Moon bit the end off a cigar and pointed it behind him. "She's round back," he said. "Real cute little thing."

Around back, Shephard found the cute little thing slouched alone beside the trash container for the parts department. The paint was peeling as if from a severe sunburn, the windows were clouded with dust, one tire was flat, and the car listed heavily to port. Moon arrived behind him, announced by the aroma of cigar.

"Not the car she used to be," he confessed.

But very interesting just the same, Shephard thought. Joe's Cadillac might be in service after all. "Where are the plates?" he asked, studying the naked plate holder dangling from the front.

"Stolen probably," Moon said. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Shephard rounded the car and found the back plate gone, too. Pinched Datilla's Caddy and swapped plates. Clean.

"How long has it been here?"

"Couple of months. Took it in trade, God knows why." Moon puffed thoughtfully. "Hey, GM's doing backflips to move these new Camaros. Car of the year. I'll get you into one for peanuts and give you top dollar for the Ford. What can you go each month?"

Shephard had knelt near the front of the Valiant, inspecting the license plate holder. "Oh, no thanks, Dick. Just looking today."

„Well, go ahead. And come back when I can get you into something you deserve.“

Moon waddled away, trailing cigar smoke. Shephard tried the doors but found them locked. No wonder the Cadillac hadn't shown up on Sacramento's stolen list, he thought.

When he turned to head back to the Mustang, the bells of St. Cecilia's—whose towers rose just one block to the south—chimed a tuneful six o'clock. He stopped and listened, hearing the caller's voice imprinted over them, taunting Hope Creeley through her answering machine. Two points for the 4800 block of South Coast Highway, he thought, and for a moment experienced the cool anxiety of standing somewhere he didn't belong.

From the sidewalk in front of Moon Chevrolet, Shephard could see two pay telephones, one beside the gay bar called Valentine's, the other in front of a liquor store across the street.

First he called Pavlik, to report the stolen plates to Sacramento. Then he called Dorothy Edmond again. After a half dozen rings, her whiskey voice answered in a husky hello. She spoke quietly and sincerely, apologizing for evading him earlier, explaining that certain Surfside personnel were given to listening in at the club switchboard.

She insisted that they meet the next morning at eleven anywhere that served a decent Bloody Mary. They agreed on Kano's, a fashionable retreat in Newport Beach, that opened early on Saturdays for brunch and had a good bar.

Chapter 15

Diver's Cove was dark by nine o'clock. Shephard picked his way down the concrete steps to the beach, which was foreshortened by high tide. He lit a cigarette and walked across the sand to the near side of the cove, where he sat on the hull of a beached catamaran. A light evening breeze tapped the halyard against the mast above him, ringing a pleasant tune that carried a short distance, then vanished. The rocks of the cove cut a silhouette against an indigo sky, while the ocean gathered and dispersed the lights of nearby houses. The moon had grown since he had last noticed it, perched above the tequila bottle held by Little Theodore, and now sat far offshore, spreading threads of wavering light into the water below.

He felt giddy, nervous. How long since he had known that expectant apprehension? His insides fluttered, settled. There was a sense of velocity, too, something like the first back-straightening jolt of the Jota in low gear, something one-way and irrevocable. He imagined Jane Algernon asleep on her father's couch, her legs tucked under the bright afghan. She said nothing about a swimsuit but he had stuffed one into the pocket of his jacket just in case. What if she swam naked and expected the same of him? His stomach went queasy as his mind filled with scenes of his last woman: the glum apologies, the strained second efforts, the

final capitulation followed by heavy doses of guilt and whiskey. And the worst part was that the desire was there, but fouled, short-circuited.

The hollow sound of wooden sandals on concrete echoed behind him. Shephard turned to see a figure in white descending the steps, then heard the thud of shoes hitting sand. He watched her stoop, pluck the shoes from the ground, and continue across the beach toward him, while her dress—he could see it was a dress now, white and loose—lifted in the onshore breeze. A large athletic bag hung from her shoulder. She stopped a few feet from him, backlit by the houses, one side of her face picking up the light from the moon. Shephard stood.

„There are only two rules I have out here,“ she said quietly. „One is no words, the other is no worries. Do those sound all right to you?“ Behind her, a house light blinked off.

„They sound easy,“ he said.

„Here,“ she took his hand. „This way.“

They paralleled the shore, moving north. Shephard stopped to take off his shoes and socks and roll up his cuffs. The water splashed warm against his ankles as they sloshed along the beach. Ahead of him he could see a tall outcropping of rocks in the near distance. When they got closer, a dark bird left the top with a heavy beating of wings. The waves, small and cylindrical, smacked sharply against the high-tide beach. Shephard thought about her rules. They seemed aptly chosen. Each time the brine swarmed around his feet and receded, he felt as if a measurable quantity of words and worries were being carried away by the sea. By the time they reached the rocks he seemed lighter, less bound to what was behind them. His heart pounded nervously.

The rocks formed an archway. Shephard's stomach fluttered again as they ducked into a darkened vault that was protected on three sides by rock and open at the top to the sky. Inside, it was quieter and warmer. He could hear the breeze whistling through the cracks, overtaken by the rhythm of waves.

A wide angle of light opened the darkness around him. He watched as Jane pressed the flashlight into the sand and set her bag beside it. Without looking at him, she turned away and began to unbutton her dress.

Shephard watched, dumbly rapt, as the dress slid from her back, revealing Jane Algernon's wide and slightly muscled shoulders. A swimmer's back, he thought, scalloped and lean, tapering to a narrow waist. Then, as the dress fell to her knees and she bent to step out of it, he studied her high, firm buttocks and strong thighs, which were sculpted flawlessly. Her legs were long and without waste. No bathing suits, he thought, as she wrapped a large towel around herself and turned to face him.

For a brief moment Shephard felt that rare emotion, the opposite of *déjà vu*: not that he had been there before but that he would never be there again.

Was it pleasure, invitation that crossed her face as she returned his stare in the dim light? Fear? He was aware of the moment as precious, inviolable, singular. It felt strange to be so sober, so acutely present. The ocean that rushed against the rocks was inconsequential and far away. She seemed to have gathered all his awareness into a single vector that, even without moving or speaking, she drew in toward herself.

Shephard turned and undressed, feeling her eyes on him as surely as she had felt his. The light went out and she found his hand again, leading him out to the darkness. They waded carefully through the tidepools until they hit the sand, and by the time she was waist-deep, Jane had slipped under a wave. Shephard followed, the warm water stinging the cut on his head, his belly touching the smooth sand bottom. He kicked and stretched his hands out in front, feeling another wave surging overhead, pounding his feet as he went under. How long since he had been in the water? He counted the years but lost interest. Up again, he could see that the water was faintly luminescent, tinged blue-white by the moon. Jane broke into a crawl stroke ahead of him. The flutter of her kick made a sparkling trail behind her, but she was a quiet swimmer and moved through the water with an effortless, languorous rhythm.

He kicked hard and pulled deeply to keep up with her, careful to leave a few meters between them. Past the waves he felt the bottom falling away and knew that even a few yards from shore the ocean was much the same as it was many miles out: strong, unfathomable, unforgiving of all that is not part of it. And just as the first lappings of the waves had seemed to draw little parts of him away with them, he could now feel larger portions leaving too. He recalled that he had been married once but wasn't sure to whom. He believed that he rented an apartment somewhere in the town behind them but couldn't quote an address. He knew that he was a cop on a murder case but couldn't remember the specifics. He wondered why he had ever quit surfing. But the regret soon vanished. He didn't know why and didn't want to know. Was it possible to continue this way to Hawaii, or perhaps to an uninhabited tropical island where he and Jane could live on fish and fruit, procreate wildly, found a race? It seemed a possibility.

Then, ahead of him, Jane Algernon's face collected in the darkness and it was smiling.

„Are you scared? The rocks are under us, not far,“ she said. Shephard could feel the churning of her legs as she kicked to stay afloat. Her hair was slicked back and the bones in her face caught the moonlight.

„No. Are you?“

„I do this every night.“ Her voice was a whisper, excited and conspiratorial. „This is as far away as you can get from yourself and still get back. Do you know what I mean?“

„I feel it. I couldn't have said it.“

„It's reductive. I'm Jane Algernon and you're Tom Shephard. That's all I know right now because compared with this ocean, nothing else matters. I know when I get back that everything will make sense again. Different sense, but still sense.“ She lapped up a mouthful of water and sprayed it into the air. „Look. She's our mother. She's our great organizer.“

„You broke your rules,“ he said, moving closer.

„They don't apply out here. Nothing applies but what you are right now. What are you?“ Her breath smelled as if it came from somewhere rich and clean.

„Words or no words?“

„Whatever it takes, detective.“

The months of inertia changed to months of hunger as Shephard reached out and placed his hands on Jane Algernon's face. He could feel her legs and arms

straining as he eased her still closer, close enough to taste the warmth of her breath. His legs pumped the water. Inside him he felt a sweet riot breaking out, birds on the wing, electric, agitated, nerve-spun. Her mouth was warm and the water running around it was cool and salty. He kissed it, then across her cheek and down her neck—she said something but he didn't hear what—until he dropped his hands to her waist and lifted slightly, bringing her breasts high enough to take one nipple between his lips as gently as if it were a drop of water. She pressed against him, legs still lunging, arms falling to his buttocks then around, and Shephard realized his strength as she took him in her hands, tenderly, like a treasure consigned to her care. Their legs mingled, locked, released; He closed his eyes and found her mouth again; he was streaking through space. His hand fell to her legs and she eased them apart, his fingers finding warmth and slick abundance, a woman's quiet affirmation that even the ocean could make no less of. Shephard could feel it around his fingers, his palm, as if it were draining, spilling in a rush. And while he pushed inside her she climbed him, arms around his neck, the bottoms of her thighs around his ribs, her warmth breaking away from his hand and colliding with his stomach, hot where the cool water had been. He churned harder to support them both, guiding her buttocks down, around him, then moving inside her, a flawless connection that began tentatively and went deeper while she kissed his mouth, nose, ears, eyes. She whimpered with each snap of his legs and he hoped that he would be strong enough. Moving forward, he found a rock and braced his feet against its rough edge. She leaned back and fanned her arms in the water. Her torso shone pale and slick in the moonlight and Shephard could see her hair floating around her head. He brought her harder against him.

She cried out as the first voltage erupted inside her. He could feel it, like electricity, quick and tense. Then another, and she groaned and drew herself back up to him, arms locked around his neck as another surge broke inside. Shephard slowed, resting as they sank down, then pushed off the rock for a heave upward. She clutched his flanks with her thighs. They strained together, until Jane's legs stiffened, rigid around him. He was aware of her shrieking, of his own rapid breathing, of the weakening of his legs. But the first stirrings of his own release brought their own energy, and while she clung to his body with ebbing strength he worked the last of his power, slowing, then feeling everything inside him moving to her. The frenzied birds took flight, and Shephard lifted his face skyward as if to watch them go, as a rich release shuddered out of him and seemed to last for hours while she tightened and drew it out, and out, and out still more, so that when it ended Shephard thought it was still going out of him and maybe always would be.

Floating. Face to the stars on a bed of ocean. Beside him a woman's hair, blending with his own. Her arms working the water slowly, her breath still rapid but descending. Shephard was aware of his own heartbeat, magnified by the water, a fast thudding, a precise mechanism. Funny how the stars multiply the longer you stare, he thought. A dozen, two dozen, then a thousand pinpoints in the fabric of night. Then Jane asking if he saw the Big Dipper—yes—and a thousand other scenes nobody has named. And while her breathing slowed still

more she asked him to swim another hundred yards out or so, to the Inside Indicator, a rock, her goal on nights such as this.

They breaststroked slowly to the Indicator, whose side was cold and sharp under Shephard's fingers as he reached out to steady himself. „The real lovers go to the Outside Indicator,“ she said. „We may go there some night.“ Both resting on the rock, they kissed again, but long and slow this time, a kiss only for the enjoyment of kissing. Then she slipped down and away and disappeared under the water until she surfaced a few yards closer toward shore, stroking evenly for the cove.

Exhausted, he followed.

Back in the cove they dried—she had brought two towels—and faced each other as they dressed. From her bag she brought a small Thermos and two cups, which she filled with coffee that was still steaming. She packed the flashlight last and they walked unsteadily back down the beach, and up the concrete steps to the sidewalk.

„Back to the real world,“ he said. But it seemed intensified, hyper-real. He heard the faint patter of a moth in the lamplight above them, watched a spray of headlights from an oncoming car, turned back to Jane Algernon, whose face was beautiful and calm. „Let's go to the hotel. Have a drink, We missed the sunset but we can see the moon.“

„No, Tom. But thank you. Be my friend. I need time. Please.“

Shephard considered her words, her face, the beauty of her body. And it seemed that for what she had offered, she was asking little in return.

She came close to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing his mouth close for a kiss. She rested her head on his chest for a long moment and when she turned her face to him he saw that she was crying.

Then she was moving down the sidewalk, the sound of wooden sandals on concrete, the moth above her head tracing halos of light in the beam of the street lamp.

Chapter 16

Shephard got Marla Collins's number from the operator, took his telephone to the center of the floor, and sat down. He was chilled and sandy, but the salt felt rough and good on his skin. Cal took an interest in the salt, licking his elbow until Shephard spilled him over for a belly scratch. Cal quivered a hind leg as if he were doing it himself. Marla Collins sounded less businesslike than she did at South Coast Investigators, her voice slurred and nearly obliterated by loud music.

„Marla, this is Randy Cox. I met you at work...“

„Randy Cox, you're as phony as a flocked Christmas tree,“ she said without humor.

„I'm not much on flocked trees myself. I suppose Bruce blew my cover. I'm Tom Shephard, Laguna cops.“

„Well, I'm still just plain old Marla, so what do you want?“

„You don't sound too happy.“

„It's Friday night and I'm having a party. Except I didn't invite anybody. The wine is gone and the record skips. Other than that I'm happier than hell. Tommy, dear, excuse me while I pour a vodka.“ The line banged at the other end and Shephard heard the last of a Pretenders song before she picked up the receiver again. „Don't mean to pout. Now, what do you want from Marla Collins?“

„I want to know who Bruce Harmon works for. Any and all clients over the last two months.“ The record ended and Shephard heard ice clinking in a glass.

„Bruce wasn't too happy when you left that day.“

„I wouldn't be happy if I was covering up a murder.“

„Oh my. Don't you coppers lean toward melodrama.“

„A man named Tim Algernon was burned to death Monday morning in Laguna. No melodrama. The guy who did it checked into a hotel an hour later. But he had a visitor before I got there. The visitor was your Mr. Harmon, but he didn't bother to use his real name. And since he says he's engaged by an attorney, that's all he'll tell me. Anybody with air in his lungs could tell there's more.“ The ice clinked again and Shephard heard Marla Collins gulp.

„I don't know how much air I've got left, but I *do* have a job. That's not all bad.“

„I can pay you a little.“

„You missed the point by half a mile. The point is that people have a right to do legal work, right? I mean, what if Bruce is on the up and up?“

„Then that's where it will end. I was hoping you could tell me that I'm wasting my time. Maybe he's got a legitimate concern. Tell me he does. Make me happy.“

There was a long pause at the other end. Shephard heard the crackle of a match being struck close to the receiver.

„You know, Shephard, and bear in mind that this is a bottle of Zinfandel and a stiff vodka talking, I must say that I'm a little disappointed in your call. I thought that maybe this Randy Cox thought plain little Marla had her charms.“

„Maybe he did.“

Another long pause. „Sorry. I say things I shouldn't when I'm pissed. Do them, too.“

„And regret them?“

„Sometimes I take the chance. I'd take it tonight. Busy?“

„Somebody just took the same chance and she looked a little bad when she walked away. That might make a difference to us both.“

„If you mention it, it does. Look, Shephard. Call me back sometime. I'll think about it. I'm not in the business of biting the hand that feeds me. Tell the truth, I'm not sure if I like you or not.“

„Neither am I. But I am sure that Bruce Harmon has been a few places he didn't belong. He seems to show up close on the heels of dead people. You can tell me who pays him to do it.“

Shephard could hear her draw on a cigarette. When her voice came back, it was thin and smoke-filled.

„He's such an ass,“ she said flatly. „Nothing surprises me any more.“ He thought she was about to talk, but she offered only a quick cheerio and hung up.

At eleven o'clock he watched the rerun of his father's Sunday sermon on Wade's TV channel, KNEW. The service was unorthodox by denominational standards, a

Church of New Life trademark. First, a gospel rock group called The Word took the stage and launched into a country-and-western ballad based on the life of Christ. The church cameramen moved in and out for close-ups, fades, montage shots of the band, and intercut them with frequent moves to the audience. Shephard studied the faces. They were young and healthy, attentive to the music. The camera found a young mother and her infant, whom she was rocking gently to the beat of the song.

Three songs later the band left the stage and his father strode on, dressed as always in a light suit and white shirt, open at the collar. His hair shone silver in the bright lights, his face was flushed, rosy, alive. He took his place behind a modest pulpit and raised his hands for the applause to stop. When it did, he smiled into the camera and studied the faces before him.

„When I look out to your faces I see the power of the Lord at work,“ he intoned. „Praise Him!“

„Praise the Lord,“ his audience shouted back.

He smiled again, then leaned forward and looked at someone in the first row. „Very few of us here this morning really know each other,“ he began. „I see husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, good friends. But of the thousand people in this temple now, all worshipping Him, how many do you really know?“ He searched the audience as if trying to answer the question for himself. „I would think that no one here today truly knows more than two or three of the people sitting in this House of God.“ Then quietly: „I know I don’t.“

He leaned back, looked down in front of him, then back up to the cameras. „I heard a joke the other day about a person from Poland. And one the day before that about a person from Mexico. And one about a Jewish man, one about a salesman, one about a black. You have heard the same jokes. These jokes get laughter, don’t they? Do you think they are funny? I have to confess that I sometimes do, until I stop for just a moment to examine why. Do you know why we laugh? We laugh because jokes like these give us the chance to share one of our most common traits. A trait that many of us have in abundance, and all of us have in some small measure at least. *Ignorance*. We delight in sharing our own ignorance of other people.

„When we laugh at these jokes, we are not laughing at the Polish man, or the Jewish person, or the traveling salesman. We do not *know* them. We do not know the person in the joke. And to relieve ourselves of that duty, we accept the joke and believe that one race or type of person is lazier, dumber, more penurious than another. This, my friends, is what passes for funny. And this, my friends, is ignorance.“

Wade leaned back, then turned and lifted his palm in the direction of the cross behind him. The camera lingered on it, then returned to him.

„Jesus knew these people. He told us to love them as we love ourselves. Jesus would not have laughed. Jesus saw the soul. And knowing that we could not do as He did, He offered us simple advice: ‚Judge not, lest ye be judged.‘“

Shephard watched his father lean forward and study the faces in front of him. The smile was gone, replaced by an expression of challenge.

„Many years ago, before I knew the Lord, I was walking down a street in Laguna Beach. I saw a man walking toward me. He was old and his clothes were tattered

and his beard was long and stained. So when he veered in my direction, I told myself I *knew* this man. I had seen many like him, in many cities around the world, men with the same thirsty look in their eyes. Men who had given up on the world. Men who found their peace in a bottle. And because I was young and brash, and knew everything about the world, I told myself I would trick him. So when he stopped in my path and opened his mouth to speak, I spoke first. I said, ‘Buddy, can you spare a quarter for a little wine?’“

Wade chuckled. His audience chuckled, too, uneasily. He pushed forward again on the podium. „He looked at me, surprised, I thought, that I had beaten him at his own game. Then he rummaged through his pockets and brought out a quarter and a booklet. And he said to me, ‘Take this, too, young man, and read it while you drink the wine.’ It was a small, worn booklet containing the sayings of Jesus Christ, who in the beginning said, ‘Judge not, lest ye be judged.’“

„And I will tell you, I felt small. Small and ignorant and foolish. So, when I see someone I do not know, or hear a joke about someone I do not know, or hear rumors about someone I do not know, I think back to that day and see that old man’s face as he offered me the quarter and the sayings of Jesus. Judge not, judge not and you will not have to worry about being judged yourself.“

Shephard got a beer from the refrigerator, then flipped to the eleven o’clock news, where he saw himself standing in the harsh lights of the conference room, droning through his opening remarks. He looked nothing like the man on KNEW: his face was a sickly white and a glaze of sweat shone on his forehead. There was no life in his voice, it could have been the fabrication of a computer.

The anchorman’s voice sounded over his own: “In an interesting sidelight to this story, it was the same Detective Tom Shephard in charge who recently resigned from the Los Angeles Police Department after the fatal shooting of a black youth last year. That killing was the twelfth last year by LAPD officers...”“

As he spoke, the conference footage gave way to a grainy, late night recording of the Mumford scene. Shephard watched as two officers carried the body toward a waiting van, its red lights pulsing. In the background was Morris’s home, and somehow the news crew had rounded up his father and mother, who stood on the sidewalk where their son had fallen, staring at the camera while a reporter pressed a microphone toward them. The woman wept uncontrollably while the man, his eyes wide with sadness, tried to explain that Morris was just a kid.

„Detective Shephard, thirty-two, had this to say when questioned about living with the stress of a fatal, officer-involved shooting,” the newsman continued, and the footage changed back to the Laguna police conference room, where Shephard stared stupidly into the camera and asked, „Fears and doubts? Sure, I’ve got the same—“

He flipped the channel back to his father’s sermon and uncapped the beer. Wade was talking about the inner life and how the person who is beautiful on the outside can harbor a „heart of sickness,” while the person with a diseased body can harbor “a heart of truth and beauty.”

Shephard gulped down the beer and applied Wade’s theory to Wade. Did he know his father? Maybe. Did he understand him? Maybe not. He thought back to the man whom he had grown up with, the cop who drank hard and came home at night to roam the house mournfully as if it were a city gutted by plague. Somehow,

young as he was, Shephard had thought he understood. His father was simply looking for someone who was no longer there. Just as he was. Just as he had sometimes wondered what his mother's hair felt like, or the sound of her voice.

And he had understood the man who would disappear for long weekends fishing in the mountains and never come home with fish. Shephard understood that it was the mountains that drew him, not the fish. He had known the man who attacked everything he did with a terrible intensity, the Wade who had painted a strike zone on the garage door for his son to pitch against, then bludgeoned the door full of holes with a baseball bat when the zone came out crooked. He had known the man who walked purposefully down the center of the pier once a month and fell off into the darkness without so much as a look beneath. Somehow, he had even understood this: Wade was simply trying to lose himself. Shephard had even emulated this strange midnight ritual. He thought of those nights when his father left „for a walk,“ and he would start up his small motorcycle, crisscrossing his way out Laguna Canyon Road, forcing the oncoming traffic to careen out of his way, to screech in panic stops.

It made sense. Lose oneself. Was it finally to find oneself, as Dr. Zahara said?

And he understood the Wade Shephard who had taken him out to dinner the night before he left for the Police Academy in Los Angeles. Wade had drunk profusely and encouraged Tom to follow. They obliterated their own good sense by ten, and by midnight, sitting in the corner of a noisy Laguna Beach saloon, his father had taken on that glazed look of a drinker who simply cannot put himself under. The elusive wave of darkness wouldn't find him. And at exactly 1 A.M.—Shephard had looked at his watch for some reason just before it happened—Wade's face had drained of color, his eyes had widened as if someone had just put a match to his foot, and he had slumped forward, knocking the small table and its drinks onto the floor.

He understood: it had been coming all night.

But the face on the screen belonged to a different animal, Shephard thought. It was fuller, and his smile had blossomed into a happy, generous gleam. His eyes were wider, and clear. The expression on the Reverend Wade Shephard's face said, „I'm here, take me, I will be of help to you.“ Even his voice had changed.

Shephard searched that face for answers. Were the dark eyes of Wade the Cop simply searching for what Wade the Reverend had found? Was the monthly jump from the pier only a preparation for the leap of faith? Was the anger a pathway to patience?

Shephard thought back to the first and only time that Wade had told him about the death of Colleen. It was early evening and he was in his room, thinking of the next day, his first day of school. He was counting dust specks in a shaft of sunlight that slanted through the window. Wade came in and sat quietly on the bed, his face grave and dark. He held a newspaper clipping, which he stared at for a long moment before he spoke. Then he told Tom that his mother was dead, as he knew, and that she had been killed by a man with a gun. The man's name was Azul Mercante and he had broken into their house when Colleen was alone. He had tried to take advantage of her in a way that men could do to women. But his father had come home and fought with Azul, who used the gun on Colleen before Wade could stop him. Azul had gone to prison, and would be there for many years.

Fingering the news clipping with a trembling hand, Wade had showed it to his son. Too young to read, Shephard had merely looked at the pictures, one of his mother and one of his father. Wade explained that Colleen was safe and warm in heaven, where good people go. If other children in kindergarten talked of their mothers, then Tom would have to understand that he could not. This was nothing to be ashamed of. All he needed to know was that Colleen had loved him more than anything else in the world and she always would. Shephard had nodded and understood: after all, it was rather simple, wasn't it? His father hugged him, and hid his face as he walked out of the room and shut the door behind him.

He had happened across the news article and photos a year later, but shut the drawer quickly when he saw what was in it. His father's explanation was enough. She was safe and warm in heaven where good people go. Besides, he had thought of her from time to time, and built an image of her, a voice, a feeling. At times, he knew she was nearby, looking in through a window perhaps, or somewhere under the bed, making sure that he was all right. And as warm and substantial as Wade was, when Shephard cried with the pain or humiliation that only the young can feel so desperately, it was always Colleen's breast that took his tears. She was there, he knew it. She just was not the kind of mother you could see.

And twenty-five years later, as he sat in the living room of his naked apartment, he felt her presence still. A sensation from something no longer there, from a phantom limb, from the ghost who had given him life.

He had nearly dozed off when the phone rang. It was Jane Algernon.

„I didn't mean to be short,“ she said quietly. „I didn't mean it that way. You made me look at myself. You made me feel something again. Thank you, Tom Shephard. And I want you to know I'll do what I can to help you. I owe it to whoever else might be next. Maybe I even owe it to you.“

„Don't try to do too much. You can get too close to things sometimes.“

„I've spent most of my life trying to stay far away.“

Shephard pondered her words. What a strange, fine thing it was, to be called on the telephone. He wondered what to say, and had just settled on *sleep well tonight, Jane*, when she put the phone back in its cradle.

Chapter 17

He had almost passed the darkened booth in *Kano's* when a cigarette lighter clicked and a long orange flame coaxed the face of Dorothy Edmond from the shadows. Shephard sat down and found himself surrounded by the smell of smoke and lilac perfume. Her face was made up cadaverously. The deep lines that had shown up so clearly in the sunlight were now buried in powder; the red-rimmed gray eyes were framed in a glittery makeup that caught the light of the table candle; her full lips had been painted an unnatural violet. And the gray-black hair that had dangled nearly to her shoulders on the Surfside dock was now hidden beneath a lavender scarf that was pinned on one side by a diamond cluster. Shephard settled into the overly luxuriant booth. The restaurant seemed barely

living: a man in a dark suit hunched over a drink at the bar, while near the window a young couple sat with their backs to the lounge, silently watching the ships bobbing in the harbor.

A waitress appeared. Dorothy Edmond tapped her empty glass with a pale, jewel-heavy hand, and Shephard ordered a beer. As she turned to watch the waitress leave, Shephard noted the handsome profile of her lined face. Beautiful, he thought, and corrupted. Like obscenities in Spanish. Her black dress was cut low enough to reveal a withering, sundried cleavage. She brought her hand to her mouth and quelled a rattling, phlegmy cough.

„That cough is my best friend, detective. We go everywhere together.“ As she studied him, Shephard felt like a slave being inspected by a prospective buyer.

„Joe wasn't too happy to see us talking,“ he said finally.

„Joe isn't happy about anything he can't control,“ she answered, as if it were an aside to be dispensed with quickly. „You probably noticed that he plays tennis without a partner. Fewer surprises, and only one winner.“

The drinks arrived and Shephard reached for his pocket, but Dorothy cut him off. „We're on a tab,“ she said. „I'd wear a hole in that pretty young hand of yours if we weren't.“ The waitress laughed with the forced enthusiasm reserved for good tippers. When she had gone again, Dorothy sipped her drink—Shephard noted that it was straight gin—then coughed into her hand. „Are you happy?“ Her voice was raw and low and she asked the question as if everything that would follow depended on his answer.

„Reasonably. I got divorced last summer and pistol-whipped last Monday, but I'm a strong finisher.“

„Trifles,“ she decided after a long pause. „It doesn't really matter because you'll be less happy when you leave here, and less happy than that later. Welcome to the club.“

„Are my dues current?“

Dorothy Edmond set down her glass and shot him an inhospitable glance. „Don't be glib, young man. And understand two things before we go any farther. One is that I'll tell you nothing that isn't true. The other is I'll tell you nothing I don't want to. We can get along as two people helping each other, or you can heave your bureaucracy at me. But it won't work. I don't mind hell, I've been there.“

Before Shephard could form a reply, the woman's face contorted and her hand shot up with a handkerchief in it. The cough exploded as she turned her head away.

„Bless you,“ he said.

„Yes, God bless Dorothy.“ She pulled a long cigarette from a silver box on the table and Shephard lit it. „I'm going to tell you a little story, detective. When it's over, I might entertain a question or two like you did on TV last night. Until then, you just listen.“

„It begins with a young man named Joe, who was one handsome devil and a good tennis player. He served his country in the war, then settled on the coast along with a million hopefuls like him. His family was in Georgia, living on a rather large estate that wasn't theirs. His father was the groundskeeper, his mother a maid. Young Joe picked up his tennis on the estate courts, made love and proposed marriage to a bitterly ugly daughter, and was ejected from the scene with

dispatch. Poor man, it must have been like sitting in a restaurant where you can't afford anything on the menu." She drew heavily on the gin.

„And young Joe was a dreamer. He dreamed of his own estate; of registering the name Datilla on the society pages; of money, class, power. A common enough dream. But Joe knew that to dream is to sleep, and he was no sleeper. He fell in with some rich friends in Newport Beach—Pasadena wealth summering in Orange County. Mostly the women. In Newport Beach you are society if you look society and act it. Joe did, and some friends pulled strings for a nice loan to start a club. A tennis club, ritzy and exclusive. His meager capital required a partner. Call him Burt. And together they bought a hunk of the California coast so cheap you'd laugh if I told you how much. The first courts went up a few months later, with a small clubhouse and a lounge.

„Everything worked. Burton was an accountant by training, and he knew how to maximize the money. Joe was a hustler and knew how to make rich people feel rich. His years as a servant's son paid off regally. After the war there was a hell of a rush into Orange County, and they'd bought in just before it started. A rush and a baby-boom, detective, which deposited on our shores a million happy infants like yourself. And for every new member who joined and paid the handsome dues, Joe and Burt took a little money aside and put it back into the Surfside Club. It grew like those babies did. It was strong, healthy, and happy. They incorporated and took thirty percent each for controlling interest.“

Dorothy took a long drink from her gin and lit another cigarette. Shephard's beer had scarcely dwindled.

„But it didn't take a snake to point out the apple," she continued. „By 1950, the land value had gone up by half. Members and money seemed to fall from the clouds. Apartments, suites, two restaurants, a dock modestly named A Dock by pedestrian Burton. The sailing contingent was something they hadn't catered to or banked on, but Joe saw they were naturals for his Surfside. So Joe and Burt began to disagree. They were faced with a fortune that neither one even imagined when they started. Why two people can weather the hard times together and then fight when the sun shines is a question that I've never been able to answer. But, hell, it happens to marriages all the time.

„Joe saw the club as a big but exclusive plantation, like the one he grew up on. A money-maker plain and simple. But Burt began talking about incorporating as a municipality. He was talking about a sprawling little city on the coast, where people might buy in at a reasonable rate. He saw a planned community, with its own shopping centers, private beaches, a progressive school system. He was thinking democratic. He was talking to the papers and getting a bit of the spotlight that had always been Joe's. All Joe could do was smile and play along. Like any good businessman, he knew the value of sterling public relations.

„Not falling asleep, are you, detective? The story is just starting to get good.“ She drank again from the gin, and though she was nearly finished with her second double, Shephard saw no change in her pale gray eyes.

„Burt was a married man, but he was in love, too, and it wasn't with his wife. You might call the other woman Helene. They were not altogether discreet, Burton and his mistress. His wife, Hope, remained in a state of disrespectful shock and made no waves. Helene was a wonderful mistress, I suppose, and a clever woman.

I might try to explain to you how she got Burt to will his thirty percent of stock to her, but I never really understood it myself. She was a detestable woman in my view, but she got what she wanted, almost all the time.“

Dorothy had just pronounced her judgment on Helene when she was rocked by another spasm of coughing. Shephard wondered for a moment if she would get her breath again. Then, as the silence settled around the table, she brought out another cigarette and accepted the light from Shephard.

„You’re pretty,“ she said, as disinterestedly as if she were commenting on the weather, or on a dress. „You looked like a real nervous young man on the tube last night. I flipped channels to compare you to Wade. Well, put it this way, if you’re interested in a broadcasting career, don’t be.“ She eyed him lasciviously, which Shephard found unnerving. The wrinkled breasts flattened under her dress as she leaned back for a deep drag on the cigarette.

„I’m just a cop for right now.“

„So,“ she continued. „When Burton drowned in the bay one night, the Surfside suddenly had a new partner. Helene and Joe were now in control, and they were delighted.“

Shephard weighed her words against what he knew of human behavior. „Joe and Helene drowned him?“

Dorothy set her drink on the table, fitting the round bottom into an imaginary circle on the wood. „It’s so nice to talk to someone who understands,“ she said.

Shephard also weighed her smile against what he knew of human behavior, but nothing came out of it. It was a familiar, knowing smile, but beyond that there was something relieved, almost confessional about it. As he looked again into her eyes, he felt himself in the presence of someone whose life was nothing like his own. She seemed to have orbited elsewhere, seen different places, answered to different codes. He wondered if this was the difference experienced by the rich. But he wondered, too, whether Dorothy Edmond had enough money in her purse to pay for the drinks.

„Joe and Helene drowned him,“ she said, repeating his words. Coming from her, they seemed to mean something altogether different. „You see, Helene never really gave a damn about Burton. She and Joe saw the possibility and decided to give it a try. She would pretend love for Burt, and Joe would kill him when the stock was within reach. It wasn’t very imaginative, but it was functional. Joe always had a way with things that worked. That was 1951, if you’re keeping track,“ she said. „And it almost didn’t work. You’ll be especially interested in this part, Tom Shephard, both as a man and as a student of murder. That is what you are, right? Burton swam every night, sometimes in the channel in Newport, sometimes south at Diver’s Cove in Laguna.“ Shephard imagined the Inside Indicator rough against his hand, the warmth of Jane’s lips as she kissed him there.

„Yes, I’ve been to the cove,“ he said.

„Nice place to swim. The plan was to bring some of Joe’s not very respectable friends down from L.A. to do the job. And to do it in the Newport waters where Joe’s friends on the department would be slow to consider it as anything more than an accident. But Joe’s L.A. friends didn’t know the Newport Channel from Minneapolis, and they followed Burton to Laguna one evening and held him under at Diver’s. By the time they got halfway back to L.A. and called in their results to

Joe, Burt's body was floating in unfriendly waters. Of course, one phone call was all it took for Joe to get still another friend—isn't it interesting how many some people can acquire?—to rescue poor Burton from Diver's Cove and bring him north to the channel rocks. Those rocks did a nice job of ruining any evidence of struggle. And he was a tough little man, Burton. There must have been quite a struggle."

She coughed more quietly. Shephard sipped his beer and decided against a cigarette.

"That's just a little sidelight I thought you'd be interested in," she continued. "The papers even had hold of it. A couple of service station men recognized Burton as a customer the night he supposedly drowned in Newport. But the Newport cops closed the case, and the Laguna cops had no reason to open it back up in their own front yard. Would you have?"

For the first time, Shephard thought that she was playing with him.

"You might have to," she said.

"What happened to Helene? Back to New England?"

"Yes. New England. That's as good a place as any, don't you think?"

He weighed her words against his own circumstances, trying desperately to get a foothold on the way she thought. To see the world—if even just one corner of it—the same way Dorothy Edmond saw it. Certain images gathered in Shephard's imagination. The peaceful smile that Dorothy had offered Joe Datilla on the dock, her subservient role as emissary to the fictional bankers, her inviting attitude, the partially exposed breasts. Had she herself been hopeful of Joe's attentions? Had she perhaps been in love with Burt? Was everything she had said some massive, choreographed lie? The liquor was enough to twist her, he thought.

In times of confusion, Shephard resorted to the obvious: "Tim Algernon and Hope Creeley got burned to death in my city last week. What does all this have to do with them?"

"My, my," she answered quickly, as if he had just taken a swing at her, "how the young man bucks. I'll bet you're a tiger in bed, telling all those little beach girls just where you like it best."

He tried to think a way into the mind of the woman who sat next to him, but again he could not.

Shephard was never sure if he could have prevented what happened next, or if he had caused it, or if it was simply the last act in a script she'd written—one he couldn't understand. With one hand Dorothy Edmond snapped her fingers in the air, and the dark-suited man at the bar snaked off his stool and moved toward them. With the other she brought a large white envelope from her purse and handed it to Shephard. It was stiff and heavy.

"A little gift from the personal safe of Joe Datilla," she said. "Remember the old advice from Plato? *Know thyself?*"

He nodded.

"Take it."

She rose from the booth in a swirl of smoke and lilac perfume, waving an irritated hand at the man who had dropped a fifty-dollar bill on the table and now stood waiting. "Bring the car, David," she said. "I'm perfectly capable of walking to it myself."

Then she disappeared unsteadily into the lobby.

In the dim candlelight Shephard examined the contents of the envelope. It contained two items, one a current California license plate—IAEA 896—the other a check for twenty thousand dollars from Joe Datilla to Wade Shephard. It was canceled and dated September 20, 1951.

Chapter 18

Ken Robbins sat amidst the clutter of his forensic lab and grunted off the stool when Shephard walked in. His white smock hung untied around his bulk and was stained with something that Shephard assumed was lunch. Stooped and massive, he looked like a man with scarcely enough energy to hold himself up, but behind his thick glasses Shephard saw the excitement in his eyes.

„Wouldn't have called you up here on a Saturday, but I got something that won't translate over the phone.“ He shook his big head dramatically. „Those reporters sure gave you a grilling the other night. Thought you handled it okay. Take my advice, though, once you get on their bad side, just quit talking.“

Robbins led Shephard across the lab to a long table that lay against a wall of windows overlooking the smoggy city. In one quick glance, he could see the heart of the county's government and the bowels of its poverty. To the east, the new Federal Building rose above them, and behind that the tall stiff towers of the jail. The Santa Ana Civic Center sprawled from behind the jail, and in the milky smog that seemed to hover everywhere, the County buildings etched their diminishing outlines against the suburbs. But to the west Shephard saw the gutted remnants at the end of what was once Fourth Street—century-old storefronts, hotels, and restaurants built out of brick that had lost its color. Their facades were festooned with construction company signs that announced the beginning of the end. The destruction had already begun at the north end of the street. Piles of rubble, cordoned off and alive with workers, lay where the old heart of the city had once beat. Farther down the street, Shephard could see the next set of businesses that were doomed, their fronts already so lifeless it looked as if they had given up long ago. Pawnshops, Zapaterias, Joyerias, the *Palace Hotel*, the *Norton*, where he had met Little Theodore, cafés, bars. End of a chapter, he thought as he turned to Robbins.

Three microscopes were set up on the table, each with the specimen slides already inserted. Robbins checked the first, then motioned Shephard to do the same. „Some you've seen, some you haven't,“ he said, stepping away.

Shephard gazed into the eyepiece at the rich blue slab under the glass. Robbins's voice came from behind him, patient but intense.

„Recognize it?“

„Cobalt.“

„Right, or almost right. I got cobalt when I did the scan the day you were here, and the reading was so high I let it slide. Shouldn't have. What you're looking at is a cluster of cobalt particles suspended in a base of oil. Try the next one, dick.“

Shephard moved to his right. The color that hit him as he bent to the eyepiece was as rich as the blue, but brighter. He hadn't seen such a flagrant yellow since he stared at the sun once as a boy, then closed his eyelids and viewed it through his own skin.

„What we have here is the element cadmium. I found it connected to a hair on that dead dog's neck. Routine scan, you know, but that yellow burned my eyes like it's burning yours right now. You don't find cadmium very often, about as often as you find cobalt or a beautiful woman who doesn't know it. So I ran it through the scanner slow and got the same oil trace I found in with the cobalt. Not that it meant shit to me at the time.“

In the last microscope Shephard found the same truncated branch—camel hair—that he had seen a week ago. It was magnified to show the mounds of tocopherol acetate.

„Here's the skinny,“ Robbins said as Shephard worked the focus and continued to study the hair. „Last week you bring me a handful of gray hair from the fist of a dead man. I named it killer's hair. And attached to that hair is a fleck of cobalt you don't find a helluva lot these days. And a piece of hair from an animal that doesn't even grow on this continent. A few days later more hair from the same guy. Both the camel hair and the human hair conditioned with the same stuff. This time there's a piece of cadmium in the hair of the dog this guy has choked.“

Robbins threw off his lab smock and headed for the door. Shephard followed him to a small alcove filled with coffee and junk food machines. Robbins was silent while his coffee „brewed“; then he sipped and eyed Shephard over the cup.

„So I go home after the cadmium day and I'm halfway through a martini—a big one—and my wife asks what I did. It isn't easy to explain what I do. But I was feeling good, so I told her about the cobalt and the cadmium and the camel's hair dented in the middle. All of it. And she smiles and says, Robbins, you're a dummy sometimes. All it took was a little art back in college to know that cobalt and cadmium are used in oil paints and camel hair brushes are what you put them on the canvas with.“

Robbins treated Shephard to coffee, light, then slurped loudly from his own cup and continued.

„I said that's great, Carole, but you don't condition paintbrushes. She tells me sorry, but that's exactly what a serious painter does. They wash their brushes in shampoo and condition them with the best stuff they can afford. It keeps the filaments clean and supple. And when I pictured that camel's hair again, I saw that we were just looking at the wrong end when we said it wasn't from a hairbrush. The straight end goes into the metal that holds it in place with the others. That's why it's dented halfway—from the metal. That explains the oil base, too. Cobalt blue and cadmium yellow. I called a local art house this afternoon and they sell it all the time.“

Robbins trailed slowly back toward the lab, his head bent to the coffee. Inside he shut the door and looked at Shephard with a smile. „You got a killer who paints. An artist. Only in Laguna, young dick. Weird shit.“

An hour later Shephard entered the Laguna Art Mart with a stack of Identikit sketches in his hand. The clerk was a sweet young man who bore some

resemblance to Elvis Costello, but with a pot belly. His name was Frank and he took the Identikit sketch, holding it close to his plastic-rimmed sunglasses.

„Oh God no,“ he said quickly. „I‘m sure I didn‘t sell any Winsor and Newtons.“
„Winsor and Newtons?“

„Paint,“ he said flatly. „If you want paint with real cobalt and real cadmium the only thing I sell is Winsor and Newtons. The best. Five ninety-five big tube three ninety-five small.“ Shephard wondered if Frank had dropped commas from his vocabulary. „Aisle one,“ Frank said in a blur, then threw back his head and went to help another young man struggling with a large picture frame.

Shephard found the paint tubes locked in a case on aisle one. He noted that Frank was correct in his prices. Leaning up to the glass, he spotted both Cobalt Blue and Cadmium Yellow among the uniform tubes. On the other side of the aisle were the paintbrushes. The camel hair brushes were moderate in price and came in a wide selection of shapes, sizes, and lengths.

As Shephard worked his way through the store, showing the Identikit to the clerks, he decided that the Art Mart must be the largest employer in the city. A toothy blond girl said he looked familiar but that she probably would have remembered because you have to unlock the case to sell Winsor and Newtons, and so far as she knew she hadn‘t. A wide and serious woman with a head of healthy brown curls told Shephard that she had sold so many Winsor and Newtons in the last week that she couldn‘t remember them all.

„Can you remember who bought them?“ he asked earnestly.

„Come on, man,“ she said. „I‘m an artist, not a clerk. A face is a face.“

A red-headed boy with bright green eyes studied the Identikit sketch and pursed his lips grimly, as if wondering whether or not he should take a bet. He finally decided no and told Shephard to try Ella‘ s Corner because the best artists in town didn‘t shop Laguna Art Mart anyway.

An hour later he merged onto Coast Highway and the slow knot of tourist traffic.

Ella‘ s Corner was just that, a nook filled with art supplies, owned and maintained by a substantial woman named Ella. She examined the Identikit patiently, once with her glasses on and once with them off. A poodle wearing a knit vest poked from behind the counter, smelled Shephard‘ s shoe, and clicked away.

„I didn‘t exactly sell him the paints,“ she said finally. „He said he didn‘t have any money, so I took one of his works in trade. I do it a lot. That‘ s probably one of the reasons this is Ella‘ s Corner and not Ella‘ s place, house, or castle.“ She smiled beautifully and leaned over the counter, watching her poodle wander toward the easels. The dog turned a pair of gooey eyes to Ella when she called its name. „The painting is hanging over there.“ She pointed behind her and called the dog again.

Shephard picked his way through the crowded store to the far wall, which was covered with frames suspended on wooden pegs. Balanced above the top row was a large painting that grabbed his attention and sent a sparkle of nerves down his back.

It was done in reds and blacks, thickly applied, a dense canvas that was as visceral as any painting he had ever seen. In the upper left, a figure in black loomed from an angular bench of some kind, while below him a man with his back to the viewer gazed upward. Jutting from the center of the scene and disappearing off to the right was a thin stable of sorts, filled with beasts that had horses‘ heads

and the bodies of men. As Shephard stared at the presiding figure, it seemed at first to be a hooded man, then a demon, then perhaps a woman with severe black hair, then a large reptilian bird. Slashed in black across its shadowy form was a dark protrusion. An arm? Wing? Cape? And deep in the dark recess of the head, two deep red sockets glowed dully.

He started when Ella appeared beside him.

„Unsigned,“ he said.

„Powerful,“ she said, cocking her head gallery-browser style, „but rather opaque. I kind of liked it after all the chintzy seascapes we see in this town. This painting has guts. So what the heck. I give up fifty dollars‘ worth of paint and fifty dollars‘ worth of canvas and brushes so he can do another one. It’s a fair shake even if I can’t sell it. You don’t sell nightmares in Laguna. Of course we’ve got enough real-life nightmares to keep us busy for a while, don’t we, detective?“

Shephard shrugged and continued to study the painting.

„No offense,“ she said pleasantly. „I recognized you from the television news.“

Shephard accepted a cup of herb tea and sat with Ella for nearly half an hour, asking her every question he could think of about the man who had done the painting. But in the end her information was thin: he had come in one afternoon early last week, gone straight to the best paints and supplies, stacked them on the counter, and said that he was a great artist with no money but a painting he could give her in trade. He had then gone back downstairs—she had watched from the window—and brought back the canvas, framed, from the trunk of an early model red convertible Cadillac parked at the curb in front.

„How many blocks are we from St. Cecilia’s Church?“ Shephard asked.

„Just three,“ she said, then talked more about the strange painting, the humorless intensity of the man, his very near resemblance to the Identikit sketch that she now studied again. After a long pause she took the poodle up onto her ample lap and stroked its head. „Did he kill the old folks here in town?“ Her eyes looked resigned.

Shephard nodded and touched the fluff of the dog’s head. „How much would you like for the painting?“

It fit nicely into the trunk of Shephard’s own convertible, which was parked, as the Cadillac had been, at the curb in front of Ella’s Corner.

With the evening traffic at its worst, Shephard took to the city on foot, moving north on the crowded sidewalk to the neighborhood overlooked by St. Cecilia’s Church.

His pace was quick, despite the throngs of tourists and beach-goers. He angled through the crowd, a lanky figure in a loose jacket, tall enough to be almost conspicuous, but otherwise unremarkable except for the Band-Aid that graced the bald spot on the back of his head.

Through a break in the buildings he saw the ocean, a smooth plate of bronze in the windless evening. The same ocean that had cradled Jane and him, he thought, and the same one that had swallowed Burton Creeley. He paused for a moment, as the pedestrians eddied around him, and witnessed the ocean as an admirer, perhaps a friend. The sun had begun its slow descent over Catalina, and Shephard could see the profile of the island, as choked in smog as the city of

Santa Ana had been a few hours before. Then, back to the street where the shadows were as long and solid as dashes of gray-green paint.

Two blocks short of St. Cecilia's he stopped again to survey the task before him. The west side of the highway was a solid front of shops, galleries, and apartments. To the east, the highway sprouted two hotels, a bed-and-breakfast house, and more galleries, the windows of which caught the sun and threw it back at him in bright rectangles of copper. With the stack of Identikit sketches in hand, he slipped through the crowd and into the first gallery, an incense-reeking little place called Outer Visions.

He was met by a huge canvas that hung on the far wall and easily dominated the dingy room with its electric blue hues. In the center of the painting was a life-sized depiction of Jimi Hendrix playing his guitar right-handed. The gallery manager sat at a desk, swamped in the smoke of incense rising from a brass burner in front of her. She eyed Shephard suspiciously through the blue smoke and finally rose to approach him.

He complimented her on the incense, which she said was homemade and named Hodgepodge. She showed a momentary interest in the Identikit but hadn't seen such a man and promised to call if she did. He left a card and stepped back out to the highway to cleanse his Hodgepodge-filled head with the sharp aroma of the ocean.

One door north was the Haitian Experience. The gallery windows were filled with small, bright, primitive works on canvas and wood. The owner introduced herself as Beverly Doan and spoke with a chipper British accent about the „primitive heathenism,“ „sensual innocence,“ and „magical visions“ of the Haitian painters. She explained that her largest seller was S. W. Bottex, a Haitian known for his childlike enthusiasm and innocent energy.

„You can see it all in this one,“ she said, leading Shephard to one wall that was Bottex-covered. The scene was of an old man and a young girl sitting outside a wooden shed. Serene as the scene was, the canvas vibrated with hot pinks, bright yellows, and rich cinnamon reds.

Sensing his hesitation, Beverly Doan eased Shephard away from the Bottex to another wall featuring smaller paintings done on wood.

„You've probably never heard of some of these artists, and you probably never will,“ she said matter-of-factly. „They are desperately poor men and women who live in the city and work night and day on their art. I'm biased, of course, but it all has an enchanted quality for me. It speaks of voodoo, poverty, sensuality.“ She offered Shephard a quick smile. „But it's never forlorn or bleak. The Haitians are a happy people and a spiritual people.“

Shephard brought Beverly Doan's attention to the drab sketches in his hand and felt bad for interrupting her charming enthusiasm. Something as unhappy and dispirited as the search for a killer didn't seem to fit with the Haitian Experience. She had seen the picture in the *Tides and Times*, and the face meant nothing to her.

„Think about one anyway,“ she finally said. „A little Haiti can brighten up any home in the world.“ She took his card with a polite smile and said she'd put him on the mailing list.

He continued, gallery after gallery, sketch after sketch, until the sun had gone down and the city hung in the brief penumbra of pre-darkness. Headlights flashed on, storefronts came alive for the night, traffic thinned, and the heartbeat of the city slowed for dinner, family, friends. The night was warm, and still no breeze had arrived. Shephard noted the last streak of orange over Catalina. He passed St. Cecilia's Church and glanced in at the burnished silence of the chapel and the dark wooden cross that hung behind the altar. There were flowers and a white-robed father, with his back to Shephard, arranging them. The pews were empty but polished. A short block from the church he found another row of galleries. One specialized in seascapes, one in the work of a prominent Laguna artist, one in budget-priced posters.

But none of the owners had ever seen the man in Shephard's Identikit.

Farther north he crossed the highway, jaywalking nimbly through the oncoming pairs of headlights. By then the stack of sketches in his hand was smaller, and the bottom ones were limp and ragged. He passed them out to the Gallery Andrea, the Coveside Gallery, and Gallery Laguna. Then the Jones-Churchill-Adams Gallery, the Gallery Panache, the Gallery Elite; Artiste's, the Seaside Gallery, the House of Art, Svendell's, Mason's. Some of the owners had seen the Identikit—none had seen the man it pictured. Finally, his legs beginning to fatigue and his stomach gurgling for dinner, he stopped at a dark, dusty store called Charles's, whose owner offered him a cup of coffee from a nineteenth-century cup and saucer.

Shephard declined the coffee and watched the man study the Identikit. His face reddened. He brought his hand across his hair—an involuntary urge to cover himself, Shephard thought—then shook his head slowly.

„No. No, I'm sorry,“ he said finally. He gave Shephard a diluted smile. Shephard saw that his business cards, arranged in a porcelain tray atop the counter, said *Charles Mitchell*. „What did he do?“

„He killed two people in town, Mr. Mitchell. They were about your age. Good people.“

Charlie Mitchell's hand shot again to his thinning hair. „The Fire Killer?“

„He's still in town. He's a painter. Trying to sell some of his work to the galleries. Maybe he tried you.“ Shephard watched Charlie Mitchell lift his teacup with unsteady fingers. He sipped quickly, set down the cup, and sighed. „Have you seen him?“

„Dammit. I'm afraid ... it might cost me.“

„Cost you what?“

„That depends on you.“

„Then I guess you'll have to depend on me, Mr. Mitchell.“

The owner sighed again, then turned to a cabinet behind the counter. „Borderline, some of them,“ he said with his back to Shephard. „The ones that work require a state and local check, as you well know. And a fifteen-day wait. The ones that don't work are classified as antiques, and we sell them as-is, no forms, no wait.“ He brought a large wooden case to the counter and lifted the lid. Inside were five derringers, and space for one more. „When a customer looks dependable, I'll sell him a gun without the usual forms. I reason that anyone spending good money isn't going to use it on someone else.“

Shephard pointed to the Identikit and Charlie Mitchell looked very disgusted with himself. His entire face lit with red; his ears seemed ready to bleed. „When?“

„Yesterday. Friday. An old Colt thirty-two. Jesus Christ. He was an old fellow and very polite. And he paid ... oh hell, he paid cash.“

By nine o'clock Shephard had worked his way into the gay sector of town, the hub of which was the intersection of Crest Street and the highway. Things were still quiet, although the streets were beginning to fill up with the men who nightly crowded the bars, hotels, beaches, and stores until the early hours of morning.

At *Valentine's*, the most popular gay bar/hotel in town, Shephard ran embarrassedly into an old schoolmate, who was about to show two men to their room when he looked at Shephard and smiled enthusiastically. He gave the key and instructions to an assistant—a boy who looked no older than fifteen—then shook Shephard's hand politely. „I remember you from high school, I think,“ he said. „I'm Ricky Hyams.“

„I remember you. Tom Shephard.“ Shephard noted that Hyams had permed his hair and put on weight since he'd seen him last. He was dressed preppie—penny loafers, a pink golf shirt, and cotton trousers—and Shephard detected a hint of liner on the eyes.

„Are you looking for a room?“ he asked happily.

„No, thank you,“ Shephard answered, aware of the stares from two gentlemen who loitered near the lobby cigarette machine. „But I am looking for—“

„You're a policeman, aren't you? That's right, you left for Los Angeles with Louise Childress right out of high school. Did you get married?“

„Yes, two years later.“

„How is she? Louise was always so funny.“

„Well, fine. It didn't work out all that well.“

Hyams nodded understandingly and shot a quick glance to the men by the cigarettes. Then back to Shephard.

„It's hard to get along. Always will be.“

When the assistant returned, Hyams left him in charge of the desk and led Shephard into *Valentine's* main bar. The place was dark and still quiet. The disco music, strangely subdued, issued from two large wall speakers. A network of tiny lights on the ceiling and walls blipped to the beat of the music, pulsing with each quiet thump of the drum.

„We've got two dozen rooms upstairs and behind,“ Hyams said proudly. „The dancing doesn't start really happening until about ten. Food is good and everybody gets along. First time you've been in?“

Something in Ricky Hyams's voice told Shephard that he was being looked on as a convert. He nodded abstractedly and handed Hyams the Identikit. In the beam of a small flashlight, Hyams studied the sketch momentarily, then looked up. It was apparent to Shephard that something in Hyams's mood had changed.

„Never seen him,“ he said with a tone of regret. „Sorry. He'd look better without the beard. Might try some of the other places. There's the *Little Shrimp* or the *Boom-Boom Room*, you know.“ Hyams gave Shephard the sketch and wiped his hands against his trousers. „If I see him I'll give you a call, okay? I see lots of faces around here.“

„But not this one?“

„I already told you once.“ Hyams sounded hurt. „And I promise I’ll call. Look, Tom, I’m getting ready for a big night. But come back earlier sometime. We can laugh about the old days at Laguna.“

Even at ten o’clock, when Shephard was approaching the last row of galleries south of the gay quarter, the night was still warm and balmy. He had tried the *Little Shrimp* and the *Boom-Boom Room* and been met with the same regrets, received the same promises to call if the man was seen.

In a brightly lit gallery called Laguna Sunsets, he found a tired woman counting out the register. She smiled wanly when he walked in. She counted out a thin stack of money and slid the drawer halfway back into the register. Still shuffling the bills in her hand, she glanced at the sketch that Shephard had laid on the counter in front of her and nodded.

„He came in this week,“ she said. „Monday, maybe Tuesday. What’s he wanted for?“

„Murder.“ She looked back down at the money in her hand and continued counting. Must have been a tough day, Shephard thought. Even murder doesn’t get a reaction. „Did he buy? Sell? What did he want?“

„Seller,“ she said. „He had two canvases with him, and said he had more in the car.“ She dropped the money in a sack and put the sack in her purse.

„And?“

„Couldn’t do it. Too bleak, too black. I sell art but I don’t sell gloom. Why should someone look at something that makes them feel dark inside?“

The question struck Shephard as deceptively simple, and the answer he gave seemed deceptively complete. „The same reason someone would paint it,“ he said. „Because that’s how they are.“

„Then he was real dark, I’d say. He showed up a few days later. Yesterday, I think. He stuck his head in the door and said he didn’t need any cretin gallery owners anymore. Said he had a new car and lots of money. He pulled out a wad of bills and waved them at me. Robber, too?“

„Just a killer.“

„Well, at least he knows what he wants,“ she said, turning the YES WE’RE OPEN sign to SORRY WE MISSED YOU.

The woman’s exhaustion seemed to draw out his own. He walked her out of the shop and watched her disappear down the sidewalk, walking slowly and stiffly. His car was waiting up the highway, two very long blocks away.

He drove out Laguna Canyon Road until he saw the willow tree sagging its green shadow over Jane’s house. A light was on inside, and when he parked he thought he saw her behind a window. He ran his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Buster began yelping in his pen. He rang the doorbell twice, holding an Identikit sketch, his ostensible reason for coming there. Half wishing he hadn’t come, he rang again. Why is this so hard? Ah, he thought, footsteps from inside ... but it was only the thump of Buster’s slick body on cement. From behind him the beast croaked with stupid verve. He felt a dribble of sweat making its way down his back, wondered if he smelled bad.

He rang once more, then turned away, started the Mustang and headed—for what reasons he wasn’t sure—to Tim Algernon’s stables up the road.

There was a light on at Tim’s house too, a feeble glow from the living room.

As the car crunched across Algernon's driveway, the sound of the tires, the tall shadows of the eucalyptus, and the sight of Tim's ranch house brought all the grim events of last Monday back to Shephard. Six days, he thought: two murders, no suspect in custody, no motive. He could see Jane's father sprawled in the dust with a rock dividing his face, hear the mockingbird chattering away above him. And as he stepped from the car Shephard smelled smoke—the real thing, he thought—and with a sudden lurch of fear, searched the smell for something human.

The porch boards bent and creaked as he moved to a front window. Inside, the fireplace was alive with flames that cast an orange glow on the room. She sat on the floor facing the fire, her back to him, and a stack of cardboard filing cabinets beside her. She was wearing a blouse and jeans, and Shephard could see her hair held again by chopsticks, dark bangs curling across her forehead.

He knocked quietly on the door, and called out. A moment later she cracked it, studying him through the protective sliver, then pushed it open wide. He noted the puffiness of her eyes, the tissue in her hand. „You scared the hell out of me,“ she said, closing the door behind him.

„Sorry. I saw the light.“

She tossed a sofa pillow in front of the fireplace, motioned to it, then sat back down. Shephard saw a stack of papers on the floor, documents of some kind, and bills.

„Little warm tonight for a fire, isn't it?“ he asked.

„I've been freezing all day. Freezing in the middle of a hot Laguna August.“ She picked up a pile of papers, then plopped them back down. „One thing I can say for my father is he was organized. I think he kept everything in these files. I mean, he's got canceled checks to the phone company going back ten years. Billings from newspapers, all his feed and tack receipts, tickets from Christmas presents. Anyway, I guess I'll throw them away.“

Shephard watched the flame shadows playing across Jane's face. There was a little pile of wadded tissue beside her. He unfolded the Identikit sketch and handed it to her. She stared at it, looked blankly at Shephard, then folded it back up and put it in a file folder. „You've got his organized blood,“ he said.

„Funny, you go back and look again at somebody who was always there, and they're different. I never realized it, but dad must have spent everything he had when mom was dying. It was a long decay, you know. Cancer in the lips, then the tongue, then down to the throat. It must have been awful.“ Jane tapped a short stack of papers. „I added it up, from curiosity. Just under forty thousand dollars to try to beat that cancer.“

„Sounds like a million might not have been enough to help,“ he said.

Jane shrugged. „Can't put a price on a life. You say dad had almost a thousand dollars forced into him before he died. I've been thinking about that. Seems to me, it was payment offered. Trying to save his own life with a little money. And whoever killed him wouldn't take it. Would rather have tortured him and humiliated him with it.“ A big tear rolled down Jane's cheek; Shephard watched her dab it away with a fresh Kleenex. „That seems an awfully cruel thing to do.“

Shephard nodded, thinking of Hope Creeley as she watched her own eyelids coming off. „And unnecessary.“

„Unnecessary? A policeman would say it like that, I suppose.“

Jane tossed the tissue into the fire, raised up her knees and rested her chin on them. Shephard moved closer and put his arm around her, rubbing her back with his fingers. The fire popped, and he heard the cars heading out the canyon road, tourists from the art festivals returning inland. He was close enough to smell the shampoo in her hair; he dipped his nose to it, taking in the freshness. Tocopheral acetate? „I’ve been thinking of you,“ he said. „Wondering what you’re doing, how you are. I’m real ... taken. That sketch I brought is really just an excuse to see you, though you probably figured as much. Last night was really fine, Jane.“

Then she was up, standing in front of the fireplace and looking down at him. „Yes, it was. But Tom, don’t make too much of it, okay? We kind of short-circuited everything out there by the Indicator, and I blame myself. I’m not sorry for what we did, just for all the things that come with it. Maybe some of what you’ve been thinking, I’ve been thinking too. But sometimes I just want it all real slow, Tom.“ She smiled. „Though that may be hard to believe. You can’t count on me. I’ve been around, and there’s something real hard inside me I can use when I want it. I’ll tell you about my men someday, maybe. Then things will make a little more sense, I hope.“

Shephard nodded: to some statements there is nothing much to add, he thought. „Well, yeah. Take things as they come, I guess.“ He stood up and kissed her cheek.

„Good seeing you, Tommy.“

He stopped at the door and said the same thing back.

Later that night he hung the painting from Ella’s on his living room wall, where Hopper’s *Nighthawks* had been. Compared to the red-black nightmare that now dominated his home, Hopper’s ode to loneliness had seemed almost cheerful, he thought. Beside the painting he thumbtacked the Identikit sketch, the face that included all the darkness of the painting, and then some.

And still, Shephard noted, still the sonofabitch smiled.

Chapter 19

Early Sunday morning Shephard found Little Theodore slouched against the sissy bar of his motorcycle at the back of the Church of New Life drive-in lot. Sunday had broken bright and clear over the County, with a desert breeze washing away Saturday’s stifling smog like a wiper on a windshield. The wind was warm, but promised even at seven o’clock to become hot before the morning was gone, a dry, scrubbed, high-pitched wind that stung Shephard’s nostrils as he pulled the LaVerda up beside Theodore. The big man was working on a half gallon of Gatorade, which he offered to Shephard.

„Hotter’n a whore on payday,“ Theodore said, and cast Shephard a giant smile. Shephard noticed that Theodore had washed his hair and that the black T-shirt, stretched tight around his arms and almost to breaking around his belly, was

conspicuously clean. He gulped the thirst-killer and found it unspiked. „You got me a tad drunk the other night, little fella. Felt like a stomped-on toad next day.“

Theodore hooked the theater speaker to the handlebar of his bike and it crackled to life with the sounds of a steel guitar. He turned it down, his massive head bent in concentration as he fiddled with the knob. When he got the volume to his liking, he leaned back against the Harley's bar. Shephard noted the twisted, dried something that dangled from the arch of the bar top.

„Dried apricot?“ he asked as a warm puff of wind sent it swaying.

Theodore tilted his head up for a look, then shook a slow no. „Bit off a woman's ear in Cheyenne. Imagine a little gal trying to stick me with a knife? And don't go asking why, little jackass, them days is long over.“ Theodore gave his bike a shake and watched the ear dance, a smile breaking through his beard. „Long over. Just a little reminder of what a woman can do to a man. Hey, pissant, you looked a little nervous on the TV the other night. Got to learn some polish, you want to be famous as me someday.“

Shephard handed Theodore the Identikit sketch, then adjusted himself comfortably on the seat. The ride into Santa Ana had been fast: his heart still hadn't settled. But the thrill was nothing even close to the one he'd felt that night at Diver's Cove when Jane Algernon took him in and arched her back into the stars.

„I got a memory like an elephant, and this bastard ain't part of it. I'll hang onto it though, never know these days.“

Wade's voice came through the speaker, and Theodore labored forward to turn it up. Shephard sat squat-legged on the seat, gazing out at the ocean of cars covering the drive-in lot. The battered rear ends of old Pontiacs, Chevys, and Fords. Still the poor people who come to the drive-in church, he thought, just like in the beginning. Wade always reminded him of that.

He closed his eyes as Wade began the sermon. A jetliner droned somewhere overhead, so high that the murmur of its engines seemed to come from one part of the sky, then from another. He breathed deeply and the warm wind struck his face. When he opened his eyes he saw only blue.

Wade began talking about the power of prayer and how it should not be taken lightly. The Lord is not a mail-order catalog, he said. Then he started comparing the power of prayer to a secret weapon, which must always be used wisely. But the sound of his voice, the droning of the plane overhead, and the warmth of the day soon transported Shephard into a reverie from which he caught only snippets of what was being said by his father.

He closed his eyes again and still saw the blue sky and it reminded him of the fishing trip he'd taken with Louise to Montana. He remembered turning her over the damp brown stump in the clearing and the comic dilemma of making love while a bear lumbered into their vision not fifty yards away.

„The Lord has dealt bountifully with you,“ his father was saying, and Shephard agreed. They had always liked it outdoors, and even in Silverlake he had rigged a mattress on the patio for summer nights. The air always seemed better outside, and they had to be quiet because of the neighbors, and one morning Shephard woke up to find a pink mosquito bite on her ass, but they laughed. Same patio where they had the party and he had seen that look pass between her and the

producer, who ducked under a paper lantern to load a cracker with dip. Too beautiful not to be seen. And he and some others packing their noses in the bathroom. Shephard was curious, but some things a cop can't do even if his wife can.

Wade's voice came slowly over the speaker now: „The Lord has provided such wealth,“ he said. „But still when we find something we cannot buy, we always say we're too poor to buy it rather than we're not rich enough to buy it. And even then we forget the abundance that is heaven and the poverty of spirit that is hell.“

Shephard brought his feet to the seat and rested his head on his knees. The wind gusted around him and tilted the motorcycle gently. Right, he thought, always richer than we think we are. He remembered holding so hard to her when she was slipping away, so that the harder he held, the faster she slipped away—like a watermelon seed between your fingers. Forget it, he thought, forget yourself like you told Dr. Zahara. But then there was the divorce, in his memory a hazy flurry of forms and negotiations, of obligatory cruelties inflicted from both sides to make the separation complete. One night still remained in his mind, a night when they had made the settlements and it must have been the mutual relief that brought them together once more to make love furiously and tenderly, both aware that it was finality, not promise, that had brought them to their last joining, and they did all that they had ever done as if in a summation before the good-bye. Louise had been too proud to demand much in the settlement, he thought; just sullen and guilty. Even the lawyers had remarked that theirs was a model divorce, but it was clear to Shephard that neither of them wanted much of what they had built together, though for different reasons.

„So no matter how little you may think you have and how little you think you will have, you can turn the water to wine and the loaves to plenty if you do as Christ and use faith.“ Wade's voice was powerful, even through the tiny speaker.

Shephard shifted his weight and glanced across at Theodore, whose hat was pulled down. The silver dollars shone brightly in the sun. The half gallon of Gatorade rested on his belly, cradled by his big hands. For a moment Shephard wished to be a simpler animal.

He gazed out again to the beaten cars around him. The lot was full except for the spaces at the back, and Shephard wondered why people liked being near the front even when there was nothing to be nearer to. But it was the County's poor who had been the foundation of the Church, and they didn't seem to mind that the Reverend Wade Shepard now delivered his sermons from the pulpit of a million-dollar dome made of blue glass. He could see the top of that chapel over the roof of a dusty Chevrolet. Its smooth panels glittered and shifted in the bright morning sun, a three-story sapphire. From inside the gem, Wade continued:

„Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the earth.“ There was a long pause, and when Wade began again the tone of his voice had changed. „Before we bring to an end our service for today, I would like to take a moment to bring you some good news. A good friend of the church, one of our supporters from the first days, has expanded his generosity to our new project, the Sisters of Mercy Hospital on Isla Arenillas, Mexico. Some of you may know him, his name is Joe Datilla, and he told me just yesterday that he is prepared to offer us a wonderful gift. You all have heard about the terrible events in Laguna Beach last week. Joe,

just yesterday, established a reward fund for information leading to the arrest of the Fire Killer of Laguna. That reward will be one hundred thousand dollars to the individual who provides information on the case, matched by one hundred thousand dollars in donation for the Sisters of Mercy Hospital.“

Shephard could hear the crowd come alive through the speaker. Then a raucous cry came up from the cars in front of him and they sprouted arms that waved from the windows. There were hoots, shrieking whistles, applause, and finally a chorus of honking horns that drowned out the next of Wade's words. Someone threw a beer can. Little Theodore let out a throaty rasp, broke into a cough, and pressed down the horn of the Harley, which responded with little more than a tweet. „Great deal,“ he growled. „Fuckin' A.“

„Join me in praying that the Lord will deliver this tormented man to us,“ Wade said finally, „and that to him His mercy shall be given.“

The Reverend Wade Shephard's office was hidden in a far corner of the massive new chapel. As Shephard walked through the door, a woman with her back to him turned and an embarrassed smile crossed her face. Wade was standing across from her, behind a desk, and Shephard's entrance seemed to take him by the same surprise. The woman excused herself and Wade sat down, still dressed in the cream-colored suit he wore for the televised sermons. His smile was pleased, expansive. „I wasn't expecting you so soon,“ he said pleasantly. „Surprised by Joe's offer?“

„Well, yes. Very powerful,“ Shephard said, not sure whether he was really surprised or not.

„Reward money works wonders sometimes, as I've told you.“

„I can understand his helping the church. But why me?“

Wade leaned back in his large padded chair and crossed his hands over his stomach. Shephard saw something well pleased in the gesture. „I suppose only Joe could answer that. Of course, he bounced the idea off me before it was settled. Frankly, Tom, I think he's as appalled at what has happened in Laguna as you and I are. Don't forget, he's not just helping you,“ he said kindly.

„Two hundred thousand is a lot of appalled,“ Shephard said. He thought of Datilla serving on the tennis court alone, then of Dorothy Edmond's words. He isn't happy about anything he can't control. And it was Shephard's nature, or at least his training, to look for what was expected in return when a gift was offered.

„Of course, he's very interested in the hospital, too,“ Wade said. „I can see the questions swirling behind that glum young face of yours, Tom. I raised a good detective. But don't be afraid to accept a miracle. Expect them, accept them.“

Wade's voice was confidential, his smile assuring. And his advice seemed to lift Shephard's concerns out of an arena he wasn't yet willing to leave. He nodded. „I met Dorothy Edmond on Friday,“ he said. „She didn't exactly portray Joe as a miracle worker.“

„Oh?“ Wade's smile had turned wry, as if he knew what might be coming next.

„Do you know her?“

„In a sense, yes. *I knew her once* might be a better way to put it. She was and still is a very unhealthy woman.“

„She coughs a lot.“

„She does at that,“ Wade said gently.

„She told me some, uh, disturbing stories about Joe.“

„Don't be disturbed. I told you a thousand times who the best liars are. Do you know?“

„Those who believe their own lies,“ Shephard answered quickly.

„She must be one of them,“ Wade said.

„I want to give them to you just the same. I saw Joe last Thursday. When I was leaving the Surfside, Dorothy took me aside and said she knew something about the murders. When I met with her the next day, she told me a long tale about Joe and a woman named Helene. Joe mentioned her, too. Helene Lang.“

„I knew her, too,“ Wade said with a new smile. Again he leaned back and crossed his hands.

„She told me that Joe fought with his partner, Burt Creeley, and arranged to have him drowned in the bay at Newport. Helene had professed her love to Burt and had managed to alter his will so that his thirty percent of the Surfside stock came her way if he died. According to Edmond, Joe and Helene Lang were in it together. They planned it in advance so Joe could get the stock control. She said Burton's ideas were too ... democratic.“

As Shephard recounted Dorothy's story, he was aware of its gross unlikelihood. Coming from his own mouth it sounded impossible. But from Edmond, as she had sat in the cloud of smoke and lilac perfume, it was convincing enough to be real.

„I read parts of Hope Creeley's diary,“ he continued, bringing fresh conviction to his voice, „and the affair checks out. She wrote about it, knew about it.“ Shephard stopped for a moment to ponder his collapsing narrative. Wade was listening patiently, calmly studying his son's face. „She said I'd have to *reopen* the case if I wanted to get to the killer of Hope and Tim Algernon. Then she told me to know myself. Even if everything she said were true, I still don't see how it connects. But if she's pointing a finger, it's at Joe Datilla.“

„Murder is a rather heavy finger,“ Wade answered. „Did you wonder why she was telling you this?“

„It's not the kind of story you'd want to keep inside, if it were true,“ Shephard answered after a pause. The truth was, he hadn't been able to figure out why she had come to him with it.

„Or even if it weren't.“ Wade sagged forward and poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher on the desk. „I don't know what she would gain by telling you something like that. I've known Dorothy Edmond for many years, and I've prayed for her many times. If Joe didn't have the heart to keep her on at the Surfside, she'd probably be back in one of the hospitals. She's been in quite a few, you know.“

„No, I didn't know that.“

Wade pushed himself up from the large desk, taking his glass of water. He looked through the blinds out to the Church of New Life drive-in lot. When he turned back to Shephard his face was drained of joy, like a fighter answering the bell for a round he can't win.

„I knew her quite well when she was engaged to Joe,“ he said finally. Shephard saw that his hunch had been right: she was a jilted lover, out of hope and ready for revenge. Fool, he thought. Ass. „The reason she's so intimate with the details of

Helene Lang's life is because ... she is Helene Lang. She's gone by a dozen names in the last thirty years. Dorothy Edmond is relatively new."

Shephard felt his ears warm with embarrassment, like a schoolboy who has multiplied the numbers he was asked simply to add. Wade sipped the water and set the glass back on the desk.

"The Creeleys, Joe and Helene, your mother and I were all pretty close for a while. Joe broke the engagement when he found Burton, his partner and closest friend, with Helene snuggled nice and tight below deck on Burt's boat one night. It broke his heart, Tom. True, she had convinced Burton to will his stocks to her, but it sure wasn't Joe who engineered that." Wade moved again to the window. When he drew up the blinds, Shephard could see the drive-in far below, the trees around it swaying in the growing wind. The last of the cars waited at the exit.

"Of course Helene was disgraced. She was a beautiful, powerful woman, but she started to crack when the entire club found out what she had been doing. When Joe found them that night on the boat, he roughed up Burton pretty good. Helene, too. Some of the people around the club probably knew already, but they had two black eyes and a broken engagement as evidence. Still, Helene Lang wouldn't let go. She stayed there at the Surfside, an outcast from Joe, an outcast from the life of the place. She drank. Made a spectacle of herself more than once. Then she cut her wrist one morning. The maid found her. It was Joe who took her downstairs and put her in his car for the hospital. The doctors didn't have any trouble putting her back together, but they weren't sure she was stable enough to let out. They kept her for observation. Which went into treatment. It never stopped. She still goes to a psychiatrist three times a week, or rather he goes to her. Joe Datilla pays for it. When she squandered all the money she had, she had to sell the stock and Joe bought it. That was years later. He didn't have to, but he threw in a suite as part of the deal. He never could turn her out, Tom."

Wade sat back down and poured more water. Shephard saw the pained look on his face, the row of tiny droplets above his lips. He had told his son—many years ago when he was a detective, too—that a cop's job wasn't to ponder human nature, just to understand it. Maybe those years of understanding the human animal had led him to God, Shephard thought.

"Tom, I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, about Helene. I'm not sure why she would tell you what she did or didn't do. Her doctors probably couldn't tell you. She probably couldn't either. Maybe she feels like it's time to confess. Maybe to hurt Joe. Maybe she doesn't feel anything I would even understand. But I'll tell you this. I'm deeply sorry that she did. I'm deeply sorry that you fell into it. I know how bad you hurt after the shooting, and Louise. I wanted Laguna to be a fresh start for you. I'm sorry she brought this onto your shoulders. I apologize for her." Wade's voice was shaking as he spoke his next words. "It's hard for me to talk about, son. It takes me back to a good time that turned out so bad for so many of us. I don't know how you're going to find out who killed Tim Algernon and Hope. You may never find out. But you're not going to find it at the Surfside. Handle it your way. Do what you think is best. But don't let the bitter heart of an old woman hurt you. She may be dangerous. And not only to herself."

"She showed me a check that Joe had written to you," Shephard said, staring down at the floor. "I don't know why. She wouldn't say why."

When he looked back up, there was a wry grin on his father's face again. Wade shook his head slowly. „I shouldn't make light of anything that has happened here today," he said. „And certainly not scoff at the strange imagination of a sick person. That was the down payment on the house I brought you up in, son. Joe had the cash, and his terms were easier than the banks could offer. Every interest point I could save was worth it, you know why?" Shephard honestly didn't. „Because I was twenty-eight years old and I had a son on the way. I figured the least I could do was put a good roof over his hard little head. I knew you'd come out hard-headed."

Wade moved behind him and began to rub his shoulders. Shephard marveled at his father's ability to make him feel like a boy again, a boy in good hands. An entire congregation must feel the same way, he thought: Little Theodore and a thousand more.

Outside, the sun was fierce and the wind had stiffened into a bone-dry Santa Ana. A family left the chapel for their car, and a little girl lifted her dress to catch the gusts. She giggled while her mother scolded and dad looked on, smiling. A good roof over her hard little head, he thought.

The LaVerda jerked to life under him like an animal with a mind of its own. It carried him across the city to the Newport Freeway, which would lead him nearly to the steps of the Surfside Club. Shephard, the hard-headed driver, believing that lies have reasons.

Chapter 20

Arthur Mink stepped from the guard house and approached the LaVerda, holding onto his hat in the swirling wind. The palm trees of the Surfside leaned drunkenly, their fronds sweeping toward shore, their trunks seemingly ready to snap. Mink's bony vulture's face gave way to a smile. „Nice bike," he said.

„Thanks," Shephard answered. „It works. I'm here for a ten o'clock appointment with"—and he almost said Helene Lang—„Miss Edmond." Mink scanned the clipboard. „She sounded a little sauced when she called," Shephard said, „I'm not sure if she even remembered to..."

„Never mind. If I kept out all the people she was too drunk to call in, she'd never get any visitors. Wind's a strange one, eh?"

„Early in the year for a Santa Ana," Shephard said.

„She's in Suite Two-oh-seven, over B Dock on the water."

The motorcycle rumbled past the Surfside convention room as Shephard headed for the guest lot once again. He paused a long moment beside the near tennis court, where a young couple still volleyed despite the treacherous wind. The woman's scarf maintained a stiff starboard pitch, matched by her hair, which was as wavy and golden as Colleen's. Her partner, a big sturdy man, could have been Wade thirty years ago, Shephard thought. And the racquets could have been wood and the couple on the next court Tim and Margie Algernon, Burton and Hope

Creeley, or Joe and Helene. The woman chased an errant ball to the fence, looked at Shephard briefly, then turned away in a flurry of windblown gold.

Shot in her own home by a man who tried to rape her, he thought. I hope it never happens to you.

The halyards of the B Dock yachts banged against their masts, a communal plea to be turned loose into the sea rather than remain chained to land. They rose and fell chaotically, while behind them the open bay churned and heaved. Shephard turned his back to the ships and squinted at the room numbers on the apartment doors. He could hear the Hawaiian music from A Dock. The curtains on Suite 207 were drawn tight.

The stairs to the second story were at the back. Halfway up he stopped and watched a maid push her cart along the walk below, a white towel peeling from the stack and a brown hand snatching it in flight. On the second-floor walkway he paused again to enjoy the Surfside view. To the west, a huge American flag stood stiffly over A Dock, while below it the palm trees bowed as if in supplication. Shephard realized that with no people on the courtyard below him and no cars in sight, the view he now saw could have been the same as it was in 1951, the year of bad luck at the Surfside. The same buildings, the same palm trees, the same ocean in the near distance, green, white-capped, violent. For a moment the feeling was unnerving, as if he had slipped back in time with the mere climbing of stairs. Other remnants from the early days of the Surfside came to mind. The same owner. The woman not thirty feet away in Suite 207. A cop named Wade Shephard, who had probably once stood on this same balcony thinking perhaps of his son just as his son now thought of him. Hell, he thought; should have stayed in L.A. At least the skeletons in the closet were my own.

He knocked on the door and waited while a cat moaned from the other side, miserable but patient. A door that nobody is going to open sounds different, he thought. He tried the knob and found it unlocked.

„Miss Edmond? Yoo-hoo, Dorothy?“

Inside, the suite smelled unmistakably of cat dung. In the vague light he watched a thin white animal cross the floor, stretch, then angle against his leg.

„Miss Edmond? Miss Lang? Whoever you are today, are you home?“ He flicked on a light. The cat pointed its nose tentatively at a bowl near the door, where a can-shaped glob of food was slowly diminishing under a swarm of ants. Enough food for a week, he thought. „Eat up, cat. Protein.“ The cat, which Shephard noted was cross-eyed, moaned again.

He stepped over it and stood in the middle of the small living room. The suite was airless and nearly dark from the drawn curtains. He turned on a lamp and discovered that he was standing amidst thirty years of Surfside history, framed and dusty, hanging from the walls. Quite a social director, he thought; pictures of everything. Here was the cast that had become so familiar to him over the last week: Joe and Helene on the courts with Wade and Colleen; Burton and Hope Creeley at rest in the Surfside Lounge, martinis raised.

A home with nobody in it sounds like a door with nobody to open it, he thought. He raised his voice once more to confirm her absence, and it echoed briefly, unanswered. Gone for the weekend, and enough food for the cat. He noted that the litter box in the corner was well used. Outside, the wind buffeted the windows and

the living room drapes lilted. When he opened the window, a gust of dry wind blew in. The cat moaned again.

Shephard leaned up close to a large photograph of Helene Lang and Joe Datilla sitting in a car. The car was a red convertible Cadillac. For a man who had „tried hard not to know her,“ his attentive smile, relaxed expression, and the comforting arm he'd wrapped around Helene looked like not much of a try at all. Why had he even bothered to lie, Shephard wondered. It must be common knowledge.

The same car that was stolen last week. The same car now at the disposal of the Fire Killer. In spite of the heat, Shephard felt a chill register down his back. To the left of the picture was a smaller one, vintage black and white, of Wade and Colleen Shephard standing on A Dock. Wade was on the left with his arm around her. Colleen was smiling at the camera, a broad and delighted smile. Wade was looking at her, or perhaps at the other man who stood to her right, also with his arm wrapped around Colleen. His face was lost in shadow, but somehow familiar to Shephard. He searched his memory for an earlier encounter with the man, but found none.

The hallway of Helene Lang's suite was covered with more pictures, dozens of them. As Shephard stopped to study them he noticed that her collection began in the living room and continued chronologically down the hallway. The last photograph before the closed bedroom door was of a group of people he had never seen, the new wave of Surfside members. Their dress was extravagant and obvious. Mid-sixties bellbottoms and miniskirts, too much jewelry, long hair.

When he pushed open the bedroom door and saw Helene lying comfortably in her bed, he knew that something wasn't right.

„Helene, wake up,“ he commanded. Moving across the bedroom in the dank half-light, he saw her peaceful face; the empty bottle of gin on the nightstand; the prescription bottle beside it, empty too; and now the cat, which had silently entered behind him and leaped onto the bed, purring and rubbing its head against the woman's face. When Shephard reached down to shoo the cat away he looked into the half-open eyes of Helene Lang and knew that she had been dead for several hours.

The cat slunk to her face for another rub and Shephard slapped it away. He found her carotid and pressed it, uselessly. His ears were ringing, and he felt a bloated thumping in his chest.

Shephard saw that Helene had left an envelope resting on her chest. *To Joseph* was written on the outside in a calm and lovely script. He stood for a moment and tried to quiet his pounding heart, but the attempt was as futile as trying to find life in Helene Lang's quiet artery. With a silent nod to his own ungodliness, Shephard took the envelope, shut the door behind him, and returned to the stale kitchen. He sat down, and heard Helene Lang's whiskey voice as he read:

My Dear Joseph,

It was only a few days ago that I realized how long I've been waiting for this. Strangely, I am at peace now. I leave with much bitterness and regret, but I bargained for them both, as you well know. The real sadness about life is all the time it gives us to do what we can never undo. If I spent my time too close to the shadows I have no one to blame except myself. And what is it about

those shadows that draws some of us, like moths to light? I suppose there is a sunny world somewhere, but it never much interested us, did it, Joe? For what we did to Burton I should burn twice in hell, and would do it gladly if it could bring him back and make things right. But that is childish, and we have been anything but children. Regret is a luxury that even I have outgrown. The one good thing I did on earth was love you, but Jesus, why does He give us the hands to do what we imagine? Finally, I will hurt you too, but the confession I made was for myself, and believe me I needed it badly. Even after all we have done I cannot be a part of what you do now. I have made arrangements to bring the proper people to the proper places, and should they fail and you succeed, no one will be wronged more than they have been wronged already.

I love you, Joe, but I wish I'd never been born to do it.

Peace to you someday, too,

Helene

The cat jumped onto Shephard's lap and rubbed its nose against the corner of the letter. His nerves jolted and he pushed the animal back to the floor. The wind outside assaulted the windows and the glass shivered so vehemently that Shephard wondered if it might break and bring the whole storm into the suite. He smoked a cigarette and flushed the butt down the kitchen sink, then smoked another. If Helene Lang was just a crazy liar, she had played it right down to the end, he thought. A lot farther, it seemed, than anyone would have asked her to.

For the next hour, Shephard went through her suite. He again studied the photographs in the living room and hall. He carefully rifled the kitchen drawers. In the second room off the hallway, guest quarters, he inspected the closet and found it nearly empty, but lingered over a collection of personal papers and snapshots that were pushed far into the recesses of a dresser. Letters from Joe, innocent lover's notes; a dried and ancient boutonniere with pin still intact; a baby picture unmistakably of Joe Datilla.

Back in the bedroom, which now seemed to smell of death, he worked his way through the large walk-in closet. Helene Lang's wardrobe befitted the social animal: cocktail dresses, dinner dresses, business suits, all bunched along one wall, gay colors and fine fabrics. The clothes were pressed together without regard for wrinkles or freshness, some of the slinkier gowns having slid to an end of their hangers, which now dipped helter-skelter from the weight. Another wall was dedicated to sport clothes and sweaters. The floor of the closet looked like a sale bin in a discount store: it was littered with dozens of shoes, which formed a small hill of mismatched colors and shapes. A group of bathing suits lay in one corner, the top one still damp from a recent swim. The suits below lay in a heap that smelled of chlorine and mildew.

The bathroom was roomy but dominated by crud. Black mold stained the bottom of the shower door, the linoleum cracked and peeled upward in one corner, and a furry orange rug was wadded around the toilet base, either to stop a leak or warm the feet.

Helene Lang must have done her entertaining at the lounge, Shephard thought, if she did any entertaining at all. The sink dripped, and the mirror above was so

smudged that it offered only a translucent approximation when he looked into it. He wondered if an approximation was all Helene had wanted.

In the bedroom proper he flipped on the light and regarded it fully for the first time. The room was large but sparsely furnished, giving off the same air of carelessness as the closet. A simple director's chair sat by the far corner near the window, overhung by a lamp. To his left Shephard noted a potted palm, and above it on the wall hung an oversized rubbing of some Mayan deity, its mouth agape and filled with large round teeth, a rattle—or perhaps some weapon—clutched in its hand. A dresser stood beside the bed, drawers open and spilling underclothes of varying purpose. Beside the empty bottles on the nightstand stood a clock radio whose digital readout flipped to 10:14 A.M. as he watched.

Shephard found what he was looking for under the bed, that final catch-all of the bad housekeeper. At first the weight of it deceived him, seeming too heavy to contain the news clips that any social director would collect. But after he had worked the cumbersome blue trunk into the corner of the room and opened its solid lid, he saw that thirty years of Surfside history had been bound in leather volumes, one for each year. The covers were uniform navy blue, with gold lettering for the date and the words *Surfside Club*.

He sat down in the rickety director's chair and turned on the lamp above him. Gazing across the room, he thought back to his late night walk on the beach—it was just two days ago, he counted, but it seemed more like a thousand—when he had felt the murder of Hope Creeley transforming from homicide into something even darker, less negotiable. As he had described it to Datilla, it was proportionless, without balance. Had the killer bothered to take even five dollars, an earring, a television, then at least some idea of form and shape would have been suggested. But he saw the case as utterly without reason. I have come closer only to remain far away, he thought. True, he had given the killer a face and fingerprints, a car, a talent, a set of coinciding descriptions fit for the Academy textbooks. But he still couldn't answer the question, *Why?*

As he sat with the heavy trunk at his feet, Shephard remembered the strange feeling he'd had on the balcony only moments before, and it dawned on him that he was working a case in the present, when all indicators pointed toward the past. It was clear that the Surfside had been the stage for things beyond his understanding, and that all the players—Algernon and Creeley, Datilla and Helene, even Wade—were unfurling their bony fingers toward the trunk before him. He looked at the bed, wondering if she would have approved. And as he stared at her lifeless chest, hoping like a small boy that maybe she would come to life again, Shephard knew that Helene Lang had all but led him to this place, to her life and death.

He knew, too, that the trunk would include Wade and Colleen, Datilla and Helene, Tim and Margie, Burton and Hope. They seemed tangled, inextricable, one and the same. As he reached for the volume marked 1951, his rational side urged him on while his instincts rebuked him, and for a moment he felt as if his hand were moving both toward and away from the book, like a cat feeling water with a hesitant paw.

But in the end it was more Helene Lang's advice to know thyself than his own sense of duty that led him to take the volume and bring it to his lap. Outside, the

wind shuddered into the windows again and he felt chilled, though sweat was tickling down his head. Her words echoed as he began reading: Welcome to the club.

Chapter 21

The year had started quietly. The first pages were neatly pasted with shots of New Year's Eve parties, and long lists of attendees. Shephard found that Joe and Helene were the featured players, although Burton and Hope Creeley were pictured three times. The gala mood quickly gave way to the more trivial goings-on in the Surfside: wedding announcements, births, deaths, and scholarships awarded. These smaller events were contained in a modest members' newsletter called *Surfsiders*. The editor was Helene Lang.

As spring arrived, so did the tennis season, and the scrapbook soon filled with tournament pictures, mostly clipped from the newsletter. The May edition announced the building of a new wing of suites on the club's north shore, and contained a brief message from co-owner Joe Datilla, who was pictured smiling at the ground-breaking ceremony. Burton Creeley stood beside him, spade in hand, but it was apparent that the photographer's interest was in robust Joe.

Shephard studied Burton Creeley's face and posture. It was easy to imagine him falling for the charms of a woman like Helene, whom Shephard found nearly out of the frame, casting a warm smile in Creeley's direction. He was small, almost hunched, and he looked uncomfortable in the dark suit. His smile was wan and forced. But as hungry as a man like him might have been for a sultry woman like Helene, Shephard thought, there was still something hesitant in his look. It was hard to imagine him cheating on his wife ... and on his best friend.

The spring season gave way to a rash of summer parties: women in light, sheer dresses, men in strangely outdated casual wear. In one picture, apparently taken on the Surfside beach, Wade and Colleen Shephard posed with their newborn son, Tom. Well, Shephard thought, Helene's trunk contains another surprise. Wade looked big-chested and proud, and Colleen's lovely face was turned downward to his own. The cutline read: „Mr. and Mrs. Wade Shephard show off their new son, Thomas Wade. He was born four weeks ago and tipped the scales at six pounds and four ounces. Congratulations to members Wade and Colleen!“

On the next page he found a Register article on Burton Creeley, the „silent owner“ of the prestigious Surfside Club of Newport Beach. It was Creeley's contention that the club could soon blossom into a little city of its own, complete with roads, schools, shopping areas, and, most importantly of all, access for everyone to the golden bayfront property of the club. He spoke of the Surfside as his „vision“ and „dream of tomorrow,“ and in the accompanying photograph Creeley seemed physically enlarged with his own ideas. His smile was more relaxed, and there was a muscular tension to his face. The reporter had apparently asked if there was some disagreement in the upper levels of Surfside management as to what the future of the club would entail. „There is always a

degree of give and take," Burton had answered. „That's what makes great ideas even greater. I can tell you that Joe and I see wonderful things ahead for this club.“

But the summer gaiety ended abruptly on September 9, when Surfside member Colleen Shephard was shot and killed by a man named Azul Mercante.

Shephard read the article again, the same one that Wade had shown him that evening before his first day of school. And just as it had done all those years ago, the picture of Colleen brought an overwhelming sense of violation to him, a sense of being intruded upon, penetrated, opened. He stared again, and felt again the loss of something he had never known, the itch in the phantom limb.

LAGUNA WOMAN SLAIN ***Policeman Husband Watches in Horror***

A Laguna Beach woman was fatally shot earlier today in her Arch Bay Heights home while her husband helplessly looked on.

Colleen Shephard, 22, wife of LBPD officer Wade Shephard, was shot once in the chest by a gunman who fled the scene. Police are now searching for the suspect.

According to Police Chief Donald Pantzar, Mrs. Shephard was apparently alone in her home when the gunman broke in and attempted to rape her. Her husband, returning home for lunch, found his wife being accosted in the living room. The suspect, whose name is being withheld on order of the chief, allegedly pulled a handgun and fired the fatal shot.

A fight for the gun ensued between Mr. Shephard and the man, who escaped on foot.

Mrs. Shephard was pronounced dead on arrival at Community Hospital in South Laguna Beach.

Police say that the murder weapon has been recovered and believe the motive for the break-in was rape.

The Shephards are four-year residents of the city. Earlier this year they had their first child, a son.

Shephard turned the page, relieved to find a full-page shot of fifty-four debutantes coming out at a Surfside-sponsored party. He studied their faces, trying to forget the story from the page before. Their cheery faces seemed to belong to a different world.

But two pages later he was plunged back into the murder of his mother, front page:

MURDER SUSPECT NABBED ***Police Capture Laguna Beach Man***

Laguna Beach Police yesterday arrested their prime suspect in Wednesday's murder of Colleen Shephard.

Azul Mercante, 25, also of Laguna, was arrested in his Temple Hills Terrace home after a brief struggle, police reported.

LBPD Captain Lonny Wilcox said that a loaded shotgun was found in the suspect's home.

Mercante was identified by the victim's husband, Wade Shephard, as the man he found accosting his wife in their Arch Bay Heights home Wednesday around noon.

In a press conference held yesterday, LBPD Chief Donald Pantzar stated that Shephard, a LBPD officer, had attempted to subdue the man when a struggle ensued. According to Pantzar, Shephard lost his gun to the intruder, who then turned it on Colleen.

Shephard attempted to revive his dying wife while Mercante allegedly fled on foot.

The suspect barricaded himself in his home and held police at bay for an hour with a shotgun, Pantzar said. He surrendered at 2:30 P.M. and no shots were fired.

The District Attorney says no charges will be filed until the preliminary investigation is completed.

There was a dim photograph of the family's Arch Bay Heights home beside the article, with the crude but informative caption: „Colleen Shephard, 22, was shot to death in this house Wednesday.“ Shephard's stomach had knotted, and sweat soaked his shirt. He stood up, set the volume on the director's chair, and stared through the blinds to the green bay surging below him.

The news of Mercante's arraignment was covered in a short article on the next page of the scrapbook. Assistant District Attorney Jim Peters was pictured beside the piece, as was the suspect, covering his face in his hands. Shephard knew that with formal charges brought a mere two days after the arrest, Peters must have considered his case a good one. An eyewitness was enough to make any D.A. drool. Peters was a middle-aged man with a thick, combative face and a nose like a heavyweight's. Mercante retained a public defender by the name of Eugene Weingarten.

Another article on the same page told of Mercante's outlandish behavior at the jail. After refusing food for two days, he gashed his head on the bars of his cell in a „sudden fury, while screaming his innocence.“ The day after his arraignment, Mercante was removed to the criminal ward of the county hospital for „further examination and for his own protection.“

With the coming of fall, the Surfside quieted. The big event of October was an annual yacht race that originated at the club and terminated in Ensenada, Mexico. The local press failed to recognize the serious side of the event and referred to the annual beer-drenched race as „The Booze Cruise“. Surfside dockmaster Dick Evans was featured in a newsletter interview, trying to restore some sense of maritime drama to the race. „We like to think of it as a race for both the serious and the recreational yachtsman,“ he said. Another newsletter photograph showed the foundations of the new wing of suites, which were framed against a Surfside sunset and looked like ruins more than beginnings.

A trial date for Azul Mercante was set. The opening day would be Monday, October 14, and the presiding Superior Court Judge would be Francis Rubio. The

article noted that Rubio, at the age of fifty, was the youngest judge on the Superior bench.

Then came the September 26 article Shephard had seen in Hope Creeley's collection, the brief account of Burton's tragic drowning in the Newport Channel. The whole Surfsiders newsletter was devoted to the memory of the co-owner. The title-page masthead, usually done in a light-hearted sea green, was a somber black. Creeley's portrait took up nearly a quarter of the first page, and beside it was a touching obituary written by none other than Helene Lang. She called him a „visionary“ and a man „to whom the future was always a place of happiness and hope, a man whose loss dims the hopes and happiness of the futures of us all.“ Joe Datilla wrote a guest column on his personal friendship with Burton, the long days and worried months that constituted the birth of the club. „Somewhere inside myself,“ he wrote, „even during those times when it seemed our project might fail miserably, I always retained a solid foundation of optimism. Looking back on those times it is easy for me now to see that it was the endless faith of Burton that shored me up. He was a man who proceeded utterly without doubt and utterly without malice to anyone. He was the best of what a man, and a businessman, can be.“

Shephard was struck by a third-page photograph, taken only a month earlier, of Burton and Hope Creeley side by side on the Surfside tennis courts. Her smile was reluctant and elusive as always, but her husband seemed to be brimming with vigor. They couldn't have been much over thirty years old.

A bad summer for the Surfside, he thought. As Creeley had written in her diary, bad luck seemed to hang over the club as over the pyramids at El Giza. He glanced up at the Mayan deity on the wall, which from his angle seemed to be doing a death dance on the silent chest of Helene.

He lit a cigarette and used a potted plant for an ashtray. He could hear the wind outside mounting for another attack, and when it hit, the glass behind him rattled with a vengeance. He shifted in his chair, the smell of his sweat rising around him, mixing with the dry aroma of smoke.

Helene had also clipped the Register article on the alleged sighting of Creeley in Laguna Beach the night he died. Shephard thought back to her account of the bungled murder, the hoods from Los Angeles unable to tell the Newport Channel from Diver's Cove. And friends to bring the errant body back north to Newport Beach. But the cops had scoffed at the idea of the body drifting north, and when Shephard considered the logistics of such a drift, he couldn't help but scoff too. What if Helene had told the truth about the drowning? Even if she were as sick as Datilla and Wade had said, might she have still sprinkled her fantasies with bits of truth? Which bits, he wondered, and whose truth? But the newspaper's heated call to reopen the investigation dwindled into disinterest, and the next page of the scrapbook contained only a small article stating that Azul Mercante's trial for murder had been postponed three weeks and a large photograph of a Surfside Halloween gala in which the celebrants dressed up as ghosts.

On the next page of the Surfside scrapbook, the trial began. Weingarten immediately made headlines by requesting not a jury trial but a trial whose outcome would rest solely in the hands of the Honorable Francis Rubio. From his own experience in court, Shephard knew that the request was extremely rare and

inevitably was made by defendants who believed that their chances with a jury were nil. Nevertheless, the Academy cliché that an innocent man will demand a trial by judge was sometimes true. Judges were less susceptible to pressure from the press, less impressed with the gyrations of prosecutors, and—perhaps from human reluctance to single-handedly pass judgment—often more attentive to the details of justice than a tired and underpaid jury might be. They were harder to fool. He also knew that judges tended to consider the evidence rather than the man, and could better differentiate between the act and the actor.

But the move to a trial by judge seemed futile as he read Jim Peters's opening remarks. His first statements portrayed Mercante as a dangerously aggressive „playboy,“ a man whose „very concept of women leads to serious questions about his state of mind at the time of the crime.“ He promised to produce adequate testimony to demonstrate Mercante's „everyday“ behavior as potentially ripe for this kind of sexual crime. And the cornerstone of his prosecution, as he put it, was to produce a murder weapon clearly covered with the fingerprints of Mercante and reveal the results of paraffin tests, which would show that the defendant had in fact fired the fatal shot.

Weingarten's opening remarks were brief and to the point: Azul Mercante was a good friend of the Shephards, especially of Colleen, and had visited the house in goodwill, with honorable intentions. According to Weingarten—and the assertion made Shephard sneer with contempt for the man's stupidity—Wade Shephard had come home unexpectedly, and in a jealous rage fired at Mercante and instead hit his wife. He failed to address the fingerprints and the berium and antimony—the two telltale residues left by the explosion of gunpowder—that were found on Mercante's right wrist.

Shephard read the testimony with a slow anger shifting inside him. But it was apparent to him, as he began the article on the next page, that Mercante couldn't even hold up his end of Weingarten's thin charade.

MERCANTE GAGGED IN COURT

Murder defendant Azul Mercante, accused slayer of a young Laguna Beach mother this summer, was ordered gagged yesterday by Judge Francis Rubio. Rubio's action took place after Mercante continually interrupted the proceedings with violent outbursts directed at prosecutor Jim Peters. The judge told Mercante that any further outbursts would land him outside the courtroom of his own trial.

Mercante's shouting came during the testimony of police researcher Dwayne Maxwell, who said that a paraffin test of Mercante's skin shortly after his arrest was positive.

Mercante screamed that the berium and antimony found in his skin were there because he is an artist and the paints he works with contain these substances.

The trial is now in its second week.

With a giddy feeling of pursuit, Shephard flipped quickly to the next page of the scrapbook. It was now Weingarten's turn to build a case, and he began by

summoning several witnesses who testified that Mercante was in fact a frequent tennis partner of Wade Shephard and „apparently“ a friend of both Wade and Colleen. Weingarten brought Wade to the stand on a Thursday morning. For nearly the entire day he questioned Wade’s relationship with his wife, with the members of his department, and finally with Mercante, whom Wade described as „a volatile man but apparently a good man.“ He went on to state his shock in finding Mercante trying to accost his wife. Wade called their relationship one that was „building toward friendship,“ but that he only saw Mercante as a casual acquaintance at the Surfside Club.

Shephard was not surprised to read that Mercante was a member.

Weingarten finished the day’s proceedings by bringing Dwayne Maxwell back to the stand to state that berium and antimony were common components in the paints used by fine artists and that such residues might stay lodged in human skin for „several days.“ Mercante was carried screaming from the courtroom after breaking his gag, and was banished by Rubio for the next two days.

The two names that jumped off the next page brought Shephard a swirling sense of exhilaration.

The next day’s witnesses were Tim Algernon and Hope Creeley.

WOMAN TELLS OF RAPE TRY

Hope Creeley of Newport Beach testified that murder defendant Azul Mercante had once tried to accost her in the spa of the plush Surfside Club in Newport Beach.

The 24-year-old Creeley, widow of drowned Surfside co-owner Burton Creeley, said that she lived in fear of Mercante following his attack on her at a Fourth of July party this year.

Mrs. Creeley was called to the stand by prosecutor Jim Peters, who has claimed throughout the trial that Mercante is a „dangerous sexual outlaw.“

Following Mrs. Creeley’s testimony, another Surfside member, Tim Algernon, said that Mercante often made suggestive remarks about women at the club and often expressed a desire „to have relations“ with several.

The damaging testimony was brought by Peters to show that Mercante entered Mrs. Shephard’s home Sept. 9 with the „singular purpose of sexual assault.“

He is asking for the death penalty.

Shephard broke into a fresh sweat as he finished the article. Standing up on nervous legs, he lit a cigarette and took the scrapbook with him to the window. In the bright afternoon light that shot through the blinds, he scanned ahead to the final article on the trial of Azul Mercante, killer of Colleen. There was a picture of Mercante being led from the courtroom, his face glaring at the photographer.

He was judged guilty by Francis Rubio, and sentenced to life imprisonment at Folsom State Prison, California.

Rhythms that by now seemed ancient found their way back from Shephard’s memory.

*Liars Burn and Little Liars
Burn First*

And the long-delayed, but painfully obvious:

THIS BIBLE PROPERTY OF
FOLSOM STATE PRISON

Shephard brought the last rumpled Identikit sketch from his pocket and held it beside the hateful face in the photograph.

There was a difference. But with a pen from Helene's nightstand, he drew—with shaking hand—a beard onto Mercante's face in the newspaper, and the difference all but disappeared.

It was impossible: he knew that. But the harder he tried to listen to the voice of his own reason, the louder the roar inside him grew. He looked out at the rioting ocean, waiting for his ears to explode.

*** **End of PART II** ***