

TRANCE

by

STANLEY MORGAN

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Chapter One

Palm Springs, California.

October 2000.

The girl on the couch gave a gasp and a whispered 'Oh!' that expressed a plethora of emotion: wonderment, excitement, but mostly disbelief.

Her gasp triggered in Drummond a rush of adrenalin that coursed through his body, accelerating his heartbeat. Not for the first time, the similarity of his role to that of a voyeur disturbed him.

Drummond leaned closer to the girl. He needed to maintain the momentum of these long-buried emotions now welling to the surface. He had to drive them on and out, to bring her to that long- and hard-fought release that might change her life forever.

His voice whispered hoarsely, compellingly, "Go on. Tell me what you see."

Her pretty features were contorted into a mask of ugly repulsion as she rolled her head from side to side, desperate to escape the nightmare. Though her eyes were tight-closed, she was not asleep; yet the vision of her hypnotic trance was no less real or frightening than if she had been.

"Oh, God," she gasped, "I don't believe this."

"What? Tell me what's happening."

"It's . . . it's like a movie. Like I'm watching a movie."

Her slender body, clad in white T-shirt and blue jeans, tensed, went rigid. Her fingers became claws. Her hands rose, as though preparing to defend herself. She rolled her head again and whispered, appalled, "It can't be me. It can't be happening to me. But it is."

"What? Tell me what you see."

She gave a shudder. Her hands fell upon her ample breasts. She pulled at the thin material of her T-shirt, as though in detestation of her clothing, or of some iniquitous thing that soiled it.

Her voice broke. "I'm . . . in the orchard. The orchard..."

"I remember the orchard," prompted Drummond. "The orchard behind your house – when you were seven. Go on. What's happening there?"

Again, the evasive roll of her head, dismissive, denying, desperate, yet no longer able to escape a memory so long repressed. "I'm playing – by myself. And there's a man – in the trees."

"Do you know him?"

A nod, almost child-like. "He's Ben . . . works on the next farm."

"What is he doing?"

"Watching me. Now he's – coming towards me through the trees." A sob broke from her. A tear squeezed from the corner of her eye. "Oh, God, now I remember!" It was an exclamation that embodied both relief and horror.

"He's opening his pants. I try to run away but he grabs me . . . throws me on the ground. Now he's over me – straddling me, up on his knees. And he's – oh, Jesus..." Again the head shake, more vigorous, desperate this time, impelled by loathing, her face screwed tight with

abhorrence. “He’s come all over me. I remember now – all over my face and my new sweater. It’s in my hair – everywhere. I *hate* it . . . hate it.”

“Does he do anything else to you?”

A negative headshake. “Just grins. He has rotten teeth. He just kneels up there grinning.”

“And then what?”

“He – gets off me, goes away.”

“And what do you do?”

“I’m – trying to clean myself. There’s a rain barrel behind the house. I’m trying to wash off the stuff when...”

“When what? What happens then?”

“My mom – comes out of the kitchen door. She sees what I’m doing and yells at me, says I’ve spoiled my new sweater. She spanked me and sent me to bed.”

Her switch from present tense to past tense was an indication to Drummond that her story was done.

“Dianna, you know now, don’t you, that what happened to you so long ago was that man’s crime, not yours?” She gave a barely perceptible nod. “Unfortunately, in such circumstances, children assume guilt because they feel grown-ups can do no wrong, so what happened must be their own fault. All right, I want you to return to the present now – and I’m going to count you up from one to five. When I reach the count of five, you’ll be wide awake, feeling calm, confident, really fine. One, two, three . . . eyes beginning to open . . . four . . . all systems returning to normal . . . five . . . wide awake . . . now.”

She rolled her head and looked at him, seated beside and slightly behind her, gave a disbelieving shake of her head and sat up, lowered her face into her hands and wiped away her tears.

“*How,*” she muttered through her fingers, “can you possibly forget something as awful as that?”

“A child can forget it simply because it is so awful. But it isn’t really forgotten. It’s repressed, denied by the conscious mind, but stored away in the subconscious. It lies buried there, unbalancing the psyche.”

“And producing my phobia,” she said in a tone of disbelief.

“And producing your phobia,” nodded Drummond.

“But why—”

He smiled. “I know ‘But why don’t I have – correction, *didn’t* I have a phobia about semen or sex or apples or rain water? Why was my phobia about horses?’ – which, incidentally, is known as ‘Hippophobia’ in the trade. Well, there are literally hundreds of phobias, Dianna, ranging through the alphabet from ‘Air’ to ‘Young girls’ – but they’re really all the same thing – an outward, symbolic expression of an internal anxiety. Curious thing is, the mind usually hits you where it hurts the most. The opera singer will likely develop ‘Halophobia’, and lose his voice. As an actress, you might have suffered the same thing. As it is, you’ve passed up two good roles because you were required to ride. But that’s all over with now. Now you’ve exorcised your particular demon. Horses will hold no terrors for you from now on.”

She was nodding, awed. “Hey, that’s right. Before, all I had to do was *think* of getting on one and my heart would start banging. Now,” she gave a shrug and a smile, “you really did it.”

“No, you really did it. I helped.” Drummond checked his watch and stood.

“Do I need to see you again?” she asked, getting up.

“Alas, no,” he smiled, teasing. “The Dianna Hart file is closed. I shall miss you. Your beauty hath lighted up these poor consulting rooms.”

She stepped to him, placed a hand on his arm and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Thank you, Paul, sincerely. You’ve been so patient, so sweet all these weeks. I feel as though a huge, black weight has been lifted from my soul.”

He patted her hand. “Go make some marvellous movies.”

He accompanied her to the outer door of the office suite, then walked with her along a corridor onto an open veranda that overlooked a car park at the rear of the two-storey building.

“Thank you again,” she said, and went down a staircase to the ground floor.

Drummond watched her emerge from beneath the veranda and cross the car park with an unconsciously sensual, leggy stride, blonde hair bouncing; a gorgeous, vibrant woman hungrily devouring life, and this reminder of his own brutal loss dealt him a blow to the heart and tightened the muscles at the back of his throat. Two years. Would he ever stop missing Viv’?

Leaning on the iron rail, squinting into the dying sun as it dropped behind the San Jacinto Mountains, he followed the actress as she headed for a stunning yellow Rolls convertible, waving cheerily to its occupant, her husband, a handsome young actor whose most recent picture had projected him into world-wide fame and considerable fortune.

Drummond smiled as, with histrionic dash, the young man leapt up from the driver’s seat and struck a swashbuckling pose, one hand on his heart, welcoming his beloved and pledging his undying love. Picking up her cue, Dianne Hart responded, climbed into the car and fell into his arms. Now Drummond laughed and waved as they turned to him, indicating that the performance was for him.

They waved again as the car swirled flamboyantly around the near-empty lot and disappeared from view onto El Paseo.

Drummond remained motionless for a while, savouring the fading warmth of the early-October sun, but thinking of Vivian, of their own young and mad-cap love.

Grief was a trauma that he frequently treated. Why couldn’t he treat his own?

Closing his eyes, he mentally repeated for the – millionth? – time the admonition: ‘Gone is gone . . . life must go on’ and felt absolutely no better for it. Time alone, if anything, would heal. Perhaps in two or three hundred years...

With a sigh he pushed himself away from the rail and headed down the corridor towards his rooms. The building was a modern block, tastefully done in Spanish style, its ground floor divided into four segments by cooling breezeways, its upper floor by corridors. Each segment contained three suites of offices. Drummond’s close neighbours were a lawyer and an internist. Elsewhere in the building were realtors, other lawyers, an interior decorator and a beauty parlour. Drummond had been there eighteen months and liked it. Its quietness, even though it fronted onto the busy, prestigious shopping boulevard of El Paseo, suited the needs of hypnosis. His own suite of rooms occupied the rear, quieter side of the building.

Pushing through glass doors at the end of the corridor he entered a small waiting area, partitioned to provide privacy for clients who were waiting or leaving. Drummond had never employed a receptionist, or any other office staff. Experience had taught him that in the world of neuroses his clients, perhaps especially his rich and famous clients, valued confidentiality very highly. The prospect of their darkest secrets being revealed to some loose-lipped receptionist or secretary did not appeal to them at all. And so he had

structured a staffless operation, well supported by computer and electronic technology, which worked well for everyone.

There was also another reason for his preference for this one-man structure. Three days out of seven – Monday through Wednesday – he returned to his still-existent practice in Los Angeles, and being staffless obviated human complication, afforded him the freedom he needed to switch, as circumstances dictated, between the Valley and the city.

Of late, he had questioned his motive for continuing the LA practice. At first, after Viv's murder and his escape to Palm Desert, there had been the legitimate necessity of seeing his existing LA clients through to the conclusion of their therapy. But that no longer pertained. Also, he could offer that in Los Angeles he was ministering to the needs of the less affluent, often *pro bono*, and that was true. But it wasn't the whole truth.

Deep inside, he knew he was holding onto the practice because it had been his first, it had been his and Viv's, and in holding onto it he was holding onto the past. One day, as with the house in Malibu, he would have to let it go.

One day.

Right now, the arrival of that day constituted a major portion of the nightmare he had lived with for two years, and seemed an impossibility. For now, he would drive that one hundred miles each Monday morning, and gladly.

Turning right from the waiting area, he passed along a short corridor, containing a bathroom, and entered his consulting room, a spacious, air-conditioned room with a view of the mountains. The San Jacinto range, which ran like a granite vertebra down the western edge of the Coachella Valley, looming close, but never threateningly so to the mini-city of Palm Desert, were purpling now, haloed with brilliance by the invisible setting sun, the sky above dashed with streaks of blinding gold and crimson and yellow that faded, at their fingertips, into the cobalt blue of approaching night.

It was a sight that always stirred Drummond, a wondrous yet treacherous time of the day, evoking memories of other, shared sunsets, of...

He shook the thought away.

The 'incoming call' light on his answering machine, rigged for silent operation, was flashing. Grateful for the distraction, he pressed the replay button. The apparatus clicked and clacked and then a familiar voice, in a pseudo-gay performance, was chiding him, "Oh, Doctor, is that really you? Can I really be speaking to the Doctor Paul Drummond, late of Los Angeles, now Thuper-Thhrink to the Thtars in Palm Thprings, Palm Desert and all points Thouth?"

Drummond laughed out loud. Dick Gage was a born actor, did a terrific impersonation of the 'thufferin' thuccotash' cat in the Tweety Pie cartoons.

"Well, Doc," Gage continued as Bogart, "if yuh could quit countin' all that money for a minute an' call an old chum . . . waal," now Jimmy Stewart, "you just might, ah, ah, hell, I've just plumb forgot what I was gonna shay. But call anyway." Chuckling, Drummond picked up the phone and dialed a number branded on his memory, the number of the West Los Angeles bureau of the Los Angeles Police Department. It was Dick Gage who had headed the investigation into Vivian's murder, and Dick Gage who had been a supportive friend ever since.

"Robbery Homicide."

"Lieutenant Gage, please . . . Paul Drummond."

Jimmy Cagney came on. "Well, you doity rat, 'bout time, too."

"Swear to God, Dick, that's the best Sonny Bono I've ever heard."

“That was Edward G., you prick.” Gage’s normal voice was a rich Harrison Ford growl, quiet but authoritative. Gage didn’t usually have to ask twice to get things done. In appearance, however, he more closely resembled Peter Falk, and dressed about as snappily as Columbo. “How’s it hangin’, Drum?”

“It’s been so long since I looked.”

“Yeh, well,” said Gage, and left it at that.

He and Drummond had had long discussions about grief – Gage having suffered more than his share – and he shared Drummond’s view that time was really the only effective healer. Recently, Gage had tried in a subtle way to re-awaken Drummond’s libido with invitations to make up a foursome – Gage and his attractive wife, Anne, plus an available girl – but he hadn’t pushed it. If nothing else, Dick Gage was an accomplished psychologist.

“You planning on slumming next week?” Gage asked, meaning was Drummond planning on coming into Los Angeles as usual.

“Sure. Monday morning. Why?”

“Got something might interest you. Fella named Keegan, innocent bystander, got caught up in that Mar Vista Savings and Loans heist last week – literally bumped into the two punks as they were leaving the place.”

“I heard about it. They killed a guard?”

“The bastards put twenty-four bullets in him. We want them real bad.”

“Aren’t the FBI in on it?”

“Not yet. The punks shot up the street in the getaway, wounded a senior citizen. He died in hospital three days ago, so it’s our jurisdiction for now.”

“What about this Keegan?”

“Damnedest thing. They bundled him into their car, took off their masks – we got an eye-witness saw that much but can’t describe them, car was going too fast. But Keegan must have got a good look at them.”

“So?”

“So they drove him around a bit then threw him out of the car, tried to run over him, for laughs. An eye-witness saw that, too.”

“And?”

“They clipped him once, sent him through a store window, then must’ve heard a siren and blew.”

“Jesus. I always said you had a better class of punk in West LA.”

“You think so? You oughta see what they’ve got in Hollenbeck and Newton.”

“So – how is Keegan?”

Gage gave a sigh. “I dunno. Weird. Physically, he’s okay, some cuts but superficial. But his memory’s gone. Couldn’t even remember where he lived. He was carrying ID so we found his address – a dump off Pico in South Hollywood. But nobody around there knows him. We checked his place but found nothing – except he might be ex-army. We’re checking that out now.”

“What d’you want me to do, Dick?”

“Try hypnosis, old bean. We need a description of those pus-buckets, and Keegan’s our only possible source.”

Drummond said, “Let me check my LA service, see if anything’s come in. So far I’m clear Monday afternoon. Would that suit?”

“You name it, I’ll have Keegan here.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

Drummond rang off, dialled his answering service, something he did every evening before leaving his Palm Desert office. While he waited for them to respond, he ran an eye over his appointments book for the coming Monday through Wednesday, confirming what he had told Dick Gage: that Monday afternoon was free. He had two clients Monday morning, three on Tuesday and two on Wednesday. Staring at the pages, it suddenly came home to him how rundown his LA practice had become. Time was, with Viv, when they would each have had seven clients every day, and would be turning business away.

The reason for the decline was, of course, easy to understand. Many of his former clients had been referrals from MDs, doctors who knew of Viv's death and his own removal to Palm Desert. They would now be referring their patients elsewhere. Also, he and Viv had advertised their joint practice quite extensively, and he no longer did. His few clients now came from the odd referral and word-of-mouth recommendation, occasionally from the LAPD or an insurance company, but not often.

Once again, that pestilential voice of reason demanded, "Let it go, Drummond. Let *her* go. Wrap it up." And, as with the Malibu house, he knew he would.

One day.

His service came on the line, "Hi, Doctor Drummond," and he recognised the voice of the girl on the early evening shift.

"Hello, Tina, how're things in LA?"

"Smog-gee," she groaned. "How I envy you out there in the Valley. It's like a different planet – right?"

"Right. How's business today?"

"Five calls, Doc. You got a pencil?"

"Go ahead, I'm recording this."

She reeled off the names and phone numbers. Drummond thanked her and rang off, replayed the details, jotting them on a pad. He then dialled the number at his Malibu home and called up the recorded messages on the answering machine there with a coder, adding those to the pad.

A total of ten calls. Instinct and experience told him seven were junk calls – sales pitches, charity pitches, time-wasters and frustraters, major contributors to the psychopathology of American life. He phoned them and proved himself right.

The other three were genuine enquiries about hypnotherapy – two anxiety cases and a hundred-a-day smoker. Drummond fitted them into his schedule and called Lieutenant Gage.

"Okay, Dick, all clear for Monday afternoon. I'll get my equipment over there and set up by – what? Three?"

"Three'll be fine, Drum. Thanks a bundle. We'll have a brew or two after the show."

"Done. Love to Anne."

Drummond terminated the connection – and with it his working week. As always, he fought the wash of emptiness that accompanied the realisation. In his childhood there'd been a song, a track on a family LP. Sinatra, if he remembered correctly – 'Saturday night is the loneliest night of the week'. Lately, it had been running obsessively through his mind. Though in his case it was Friday.

Since his arrival in the valley there'd been an abundance of invitations. There were eighty golf courses and a thousand tennis courts in this desert playground, and it was virtually impossible to meet anyone who did not play one or both games, who did not press him to share their enthusiasm.

But, risking offending their good hearts, he always refused, made excuses (he had a hundred of them), lied. It wasn't the game he was rejecting; it was the ever-attendant complications. For a thirty-four-year-old, presentable, professional widower, the valley was a sexy, mischievous place that abhorred such waste. And he was simply not ready to be salvaged.

It was not an easy game to play. Part of him yearned to recapture even a semblance of what he had had with Viv. To cruise Palm Canyon Drive on a Saturday night and see the Valley's 'beautiful people' enjoying each other, living each other, tore at his heart. Twice, only, he had succumbed, each occasion a disaster. Drummond was simply not ready.

Mechanically, he filed the computer disks and audio tapes from the day's sessions, locked the steel cabinet, checked around the office, and prepared to depart. The cleaning would be done the following day by a professional, bonded company.

As he locked the external glass door, his internist neighbour emerged into the corridor, locking his own door. Kieran Connor was a contemporary, a five-foot-four energised butterball with an aggravated, self-confessed Casanova complex. Once, over a friendly beer, Drummond had voiced his suspicion of Connor's motives in allowing himself unlimited professional access to the naked female body, and Connor had laughed. "Trouble is, I can never get rich enough to be age-selective."

Connor now greeted him. "Hey, Paul! Another week, another ten thousand dollars. My, how they fly."

"The weeks or the dollars?"

"Both, my man, both."

He accompanied Drummond along the corridor and down the rear stairs to the parking lot, a head shorter, almost running to keep up with Drummond's long, easy stride.

"You fixed for the week-end?" he panted.

"What're you offering?" Drummond asked, just to hear it.

Connor rolled his eyes. "Catalina. This babe got a hundred million dollars . . . and a yacht the size of the Lusitania . . . crewed by fifty nymphets in see-through bikinis . . . and it never leaves port. How's that grab yuh?"

Drummond grinned. "Right where it does the most good, but no thanks, I'm fixed. Have fun, Kieron."

Drummond walked away to his car, a vintage sage-green Daimler Sovereign, climbed in and started the engine. For a moment, as he sat there, the thought passed through his mind that maybe an outrageous week-end in Catalina with a covey of nubile airheads was exactly what he needed; an experience so awful and degrading it would shock his psychic system like a massive abreaction.

But as he drove the mile of winding road to his home in the San Jacinto foothills, another thought was in his mind. The bank robbery victim.

Keegan.

The man and his circumstances went on tugging at his mind all weekend. Yet Drummond did not question the persistence of these thoughts.

During his study of the psychosciences, he had lingered on the matter of prescience, precognition, the foreknowledge of future events claimed by so many people, and had formed his own theories about its reality. What struck him most was not that so many people experienced foreknowledge, but that they paid so little heed to the information at the time. There appeared to be a gap between receipt of the information and its acknowledgement by the conscious mind, so that, for instance, precognition of a family

death became meaningful only after the real news had been received. People did not sufficiently trust their intuition.

With hindsight, Drummond would later recall his own failing to acknowledge and appreciate the full force of his week-end obsession with Keegan – and to forearm himself against the ocean of troubles that their association would bring.

Chapter Two

Monday.

Drummond was up at dawn, his usual awakening time in the desert. From the front deck of the house, sipping coffee, he watched the sun rise over the San Bernadino Mountains, which formed the eastern boundary of the valley.

The house was spacious, two-bedrooms, single-storey, built almost entirely of glass to capture the views on all sides. There was a bedroom, unoccupied, at the rear of the attached double garage.

Eighteen months ago, Drummond had chosen the house for its comparative isolation. But gradually he had grown to appreciate not only its location but the house itself and the views it offered, and never more so than at this time of day.

Situated at the end of a minor, steeply-rising road, the house commanded a 180 degree panorama that encompassed almost the entire valley. To Drummond's right, the view extended above and beyond the lush tree-tops of the Ironwood Country Club and the granite hills of the Living Desert Reserve to the distant reaches of the San Bernadino range. Ahead, Drummond looked down upon tree-lined avenues of Palm Desert; and to his left, he could follow the main artery, Highway One-Eleven, out of the valley, to Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City and Palm Springs.

Even though most desert-dwellers were early risers, and he could see traffic movement along the distant One-Eleven, at this time of day Drummond felt he had the world to himself. At this modest altitude the air was cool and clear and clean, and, after the fog of Los Angeles, a joy to inhale.

Watching the blazing sun emerge from behind the San Bernadino peaks, savouring the air, Drummond was suffused with a heady awareness of the advent of a brand new day in these moments, and felt the stir of faith that on one such day he, too, would feel reborn, renewed, able to start again. It was a feeling he could never have experienced in Los Angeles, or in any city. The desert was magical.

At six o'clock he joined the modest traffic on the One-Eleven, also known as Palm Canyon Drive, and ran easily through elegant Rancho Mirage with its pristine country clubs and its cross-streets named to honour famous local residents – Bob Hope Drive; Frank Sinatra Drive; through less-exalted Cathedral City; then into the jewel itself, Palm Springs, and on into the desert, the immediate transition from emerald oasis to barren scrub never failing to astound Drummond.

Born in mountainous, fertile, arboreal Northern California, where the physiognomy of the land remained fairly constant, he had, since his first visit, remained amazed at the miraculous transformations that perpetually took place in the Valley.

Sumptuous housing developments, set in verdant, exotically landscaped golf courses, shot up overnight like mushrooms out of the raw, stone desert. It was possible to drive along a road and see a prestigious development of homes on one side, desert on the other, then to drive that road again a few weeks later and find the desert gone, replaced by a golfer's paradise.

For Drummond, the Valley seemed vibrant with creative energy, yet it was not the frenzied, neurotic power that drove Los Angeles or New York. Here, perhaps because of the heat, activity seemed slower, yet things still got done. The Valley had a soul, and, gradually, Drummond was growing to feel part of it.

A few miles north of Palm Springs, the One-Eleven joined the Interstate Ten, the highway that stretched east across the continent to Florida, and would take Drummond west, almost to his front door in Malibu.

At this junction of the highways, the San Bernadino range pressed close to the San Jacinto Mountains, forming a gap that Drummond regarded as a psychological gateway to and from his California Shangri-La.

From this point on, all things were different. Here, suddenly, was the dirty, noisy, frenzied outside world. Traffic boomed along the I-10 with a manic urgency unheard of in the Valley, and Drummond had to quickly shift into mental high gear, accelerate hard, as a giant tractor-trailer bore down on him from the rear, air-horns blaring.

He smiled wryly to himself. How many times had he, on precisely this stretch of highway, questioned his sanity – and his motives – in returning to the city? But what transpired was always the same schizoid condition – half his mind telling him the sane thing to do was about-turn at the next exit and fly back to Shangri-La the other half compelling him towards Malibu.

His inability to decide and take action annoyed him, and yet he knew, professionally, that the dilemma was a common human condition. He recalled treating a teenage girl, the only child of divorced parents, who, torn between living either with her mother in San Francisco or her father in LA, was so stressed with indecision that she attempted suicide.

The facile solution was to share, but that, as he now knew from personal experience, was no answer at all. The girl, in a chronic state of stress, had told him, "When I'm there, I want to be here; and when I'm here, I want to be there. I just want to die."

There were certain decisions in life that seemed impossible to make. His treatment for the girl was concentrated suggestion therapy for mental relaxation, and the advice: 'Wait. Circumstances change. Life is constant change.' In the girl's case, she did not have to wait long. Her mother re-united with her father and moved back to Los Angeles. But the kicker was, within six months the girl fell in love and moved to Duluth with her boyfriend.

'Wait. Circumstances change' was advice Drummond had given himself many times in the past eighteen months, and he did so again now. Accelerating into the fast lane, he turned on the radio, found quiet, uninterrupted music, applied suggestion therapy for his own mental relaxation, and settled into the journey.

Moments later, into his reverie, passed a shadow of prescience that on this return to Los Angeles his circumstances would change. Wishful thinking? With a mental shrug, the shadow was gone.

Cruising, relaxed, cocooned by the music and the flow of traffic, Drummond glanced reflexively at the dashboard dials and saw he was low on gas. The Daimler was equipped with dual tanks. He pressed the switching mechanism, waited for the needle to rise, and groaned. The second tank was empty. Since moving to the Valley, where his mileage was minimal, he'd lost his LA habit of always ensuring the spare tank was full.

Moving to the inside lane, he took the exit ramp for Upland, turned right into the town and found an Exxon station almost immediately. He had filled the empty tank and was topping up the second when a voice behind him asked, "Sir . . . you heading for LA?"

Drummond turned, gave the young man a slow, thorough appraisal. The threat of hitchhiker robbery notwithstanding, Drummond liked to talk to these young people, usually found their histories interesting, invariably learned something from them, occasionally could offer help. This one, medium height, blonde curly hair, wearing glasses, clean jeans and a good black leather jacket, looked studious and okay. He met Drummond's gaze with an understanding, whimsical grin and said, "I haven't mugged anyone all day, honest."

Drummond returned the grin. "Okay, you pay for the gas, I'll take you in." The kid winced at the pump tab. "Sir, if I had eighteen bucks, I'd have been on the bus yesterday." Drummond sighed. "Why is it I never pick up rich hitch-hikers?" He crossed to the office, paid the bill, motioned the young man to get in as he returned.

"Paul Drummond," he said, firing the engine.

"Alan Forrest. Thanks a million, I was getting desperate. Boy, would you listen to that engine. This is the first time I've been in a Jag."

"Daimler, but close. Why desperate, Alan?"

"I'm heading back to UCLA. My aunt died in Phoenix, she brought me up. I've taken a week off for the funeral and sorting things out, and I'm missing lectures. Also I work nights off campus, in a hamburger joint, and I should've been back last night. I hope I've still got the job."

"UCLA was my Alma Mater."

"No kidding! What was your major?"

"Psychology. What's yours?"

"Law – with Politics a close second."

"What's your ambition?"

Forrest gave his amiable grin and a shrug. "To be president."

Drummond nodded. "Why not?"

There was silence while Drummond negotiated their entrance back onto the I-10, slipping skilfully into the stream of thundering trucks and out into the fast lane with a burst of acceleration that brought a gasp of admiration from Forrest.

"No doubt you're studying the current dogfight very intently?"

"The campaign? Yes, *sir*."

They were referring to the presidential election, to the increasingly vociferous contest that was developing between the candidates – Democrat Senator Milton Byrne and Republican Jack Crane, Governor of California.

With only four weeks to go before the general election, the race was building into a knock-down, drag-out battle, the tactics of which were becoming increasingly questionable, and were even beginning to capture the attention of the politically indifferent public.

"Yes, sir," Forrest repeated, thoughtfully. "That guy Crane – he's something else. It'll be a sad day for the USA when he gets in."

"'When'? Not 'if'?" smiled Drummond.

Forrest shook his blonde locks. “He’ll get in. Milton Byrne is a nice guy, but he’s a wimp, an innocent. Crane will eat him alive.”

“Crane comes highly recommended,” said Drummond, not argumentatively, just to draw Forrest out, hear his views. “War hero, effective state senator and governor. And he has a popular platform – anti-crime, anti-drugs.

“But have you heard his *rhetoric*?” protested Forrest, and gave a rueful laugh. “He comes on like General Midwinter in *The Billion Dollar Brain*. ‘I love my country with a deep and abiding passion – and will fight to the death those who wish to destroy her!’ Jesus.”

“And you don’t approve of such patriotism? Don’t you think it’s time somebody *did* wage war on crime and drugs in this country?”

“Oh, hell, yes. Of course it is. But,” Forrest sought the words, “it’s the guy. It’s Crane. There’s something about him.” He looked sideways at Drummond. “Are you something in Psych now?”

Drummond dipped into the breast pocket of his dark blue suit and produced a business card.

Forrest grinned. “Yeh, you’re something in Psych. Well, you ought to be able to get inside Jack Crane’s head.”

“To be honest, I haven’t given him or the election much thought. I hear the issues, but tend to ignore the games. There is a theory that a man can become presidential material only after he’s elected president. It all depends on how he responds to the greatness thrust upon him. We’ve seen weak men become strong in office, and vice versa. There’s no way of knowing what kind of president Jack Crane will make if,” he smiled, gave a deferential nod, “*when* he gets into the White House. Anyway, what makes you so sure? Come on, now, I want some profound and learned argument.”

Forrest nodded, enjoying the challenge. “Okay, point one – Jack Crane is one tough sonofabitch. He was a Vietnam War hero, and a shoo-in into state politics as a war hero, he didn’t have to try. During his terms in the state capitol he made a lot of powerful friends in very high places, and when it came to the gubernatorial race, there was no contest. The sub-points here are – (a) the guy doesn’t know what it means to lose, so he’s coming over now as super-confident, and (b) he’s still got all those powerful pals behind him – and all the money in the world.

“Point two – *because* he’s got all the money in the world behind him – and Milton Byrne hasn’t – Crane is going to lay down an advertising campaign like a napalm strike. He’ll incinerate Byrne over the next four weeks with a campaign of ‘negative attacks’ – what Crane’s political consultants euphemistically call ‘contrast’ or ‘comparative’ campaigning, but which means Crane’s cronies are going to dig up as much dirt about Byrne as they can find – and probably plenty they can’t find – and splash it across the nation’s screens nightly.

“Point three –” Forrest held up three fingers, “Crane has, by virtue of his financial backing, by far the superior management team. Hell, he’s got an army – and they’re the best in the business. And with his army he’s going to wage an air war like you wouldn’t believe.”

“You mean the ad campaign?” said Drummond, slowing as he encountered a traffic build-up, harbinger of the inevitable rush-hour crawl. “No, that’s something else. I mean the manipulation of TV time by Crane’s professionals. You’ll see, they’ll produce an agenda for him that will dominate the networks’ newscasts. He’ll be on every major newscast – Crane-crowding and Byrne-bashing to fifty million Americans – every night.”

Drummond laughed. “ ‘Crane-crowing and Byrne-bashing’. I like that. But what will poor old Byrne be doing in the meantime? Surely he’ll be doing his share of ‘Crane-clobbering and Byrne-boosting’?”

“*Touché*,” grinned Forrest. “But no, he won’t. Byrne hasn’t got it in him. He’s a scholar, an idealist. He just isn’t capable of dirty tricks. He’s going to pin his hopes on the television debates with Crane – which no doubt Byrne will win hands down – but they’ll have nowhere near the effect of Crane’s fire-storm attacks. Any day now, Crane will go on the offensive, Byrne will be slammed back on the defensive, and he’ll never recover. Bet good money on it, Doc – come next January, Jack Crane will be taking the presidential oath – and God help us all.”

Drummond looked at him, frowning. “Why are you so frightened of him, Alan?”

Forrest gave a pensive sigh. “I’ve met Jack Crane. I’ve been around him during his gubernatorial campaigns, a bunch of us kids did gopher work for him. The guy’s a pig, Doc. He’s got a mouth like a Brooklyn hood. In public he comes on like the Messiah, the saviour of America, the guy who’s steeped in the old-fashioned virtues of truth, honesty, and respect for the law, and who’s going to restore those virtues to America. In private, I believe he’s all opportunist and a thug. I really don’t think we can afford Jack Crane as our president.”

Drummond raised his brows. “That’s pretty scathing stuff.”

“I mean it. You had to be there, see him in action. They used to say Tricky Dick was a cold fish, but Crane, boy, when the cameras aren’t turning, that’s one ice-cold sonofabitch.”

“What d’you expect he might do that could hurt the country?”

Forrest shrugged. “I dunno. Look what Tricky Dicky did. I can’t imagine anything specific. It’s more a feeling that the *mood* of the country will change. Y’know, things are pretty good for us right now – we’re getting on better with the Communists than we ever did. And the rest of the world, even the Arabs, thinks we’re okay. I think Crane could change all that.”

“Why should he want to?”

Forrest thought about it. “Because everything’s too damned slow and quiet. No new president can shine when things are so peaceful. Jack Crane hates the status quo. He’s a military animal, a bloody war hero. He needs conflict, confrontation – and where there isn’t any, he’ll create it, in order to shine when he puts it down.”

“Well, he’s got plenty to be going on with, right here in LA – the crime, the gang wars, drugs.”

Forrest grinned, acknowledging that Drummond was proving his point. “Exactly. Hence his campaign platform.”

“But it’s what the voters want!” Drummond laughingly protested. “Presumably, it’s why Crane was elected Republican candidate – the delegates *want* a strong man in the White House.”

“Strong, yes. We all want a strong president. But it’s a question of degree . . . and how that strength is used. In many respects, Nixon was a strong president – and we got Watergate. Kennedy was strong – and we got the Cuban missile confrontation and the Bay of Pigs fiasco. And let’s not forget that other little head-to-head . . . what was it called? . . . oh, yeah, Vietnam.”

Drummond capitulated with a grin. “I was going to say we’ve got Congress to keep an eye on any potential abuse, but I guess you just shot me down. Well, if Crane is, as you believe, an opportunist and a thug – and, as you predict, a certainty for the White House – all we can do is hope that elevation to the presidency will elevate his morality. I’ll tell you

one thing, though . . . no, two things. From now on I'll be watching and listening to Jack Crane with more interest than I would have if I hadn't met you."

"Good. He sure needs watching. And the second thing?"

"You ought to skip law and go straight into politics. Your country needs you."

By now they were in the thick of morning traffic, and well into the centre of the vast, formless sprawl that was Los Angeles. The I-10 had by now assumed an additional title – the Santa Monica Freeway – which cleaved the city in a virtually straight east-west line, running south of Hollywood, Beverly Hills and Westwood Village, the latter accommodating the huge campus of UCLA – the University of California at Los Angeles.

Approaching Mar Vista, and the junction with the north-bound I-405, the San Diego Freeway, Drummond checked the time and made a decision.

Even though, from this point, UCLA was less than three miles distant, such was the structure of the city that, without a car, his young passenger might take half a day to get there.

"I'll take you in," he said, running off the I-10 onto the 405.

"To campus? Wow, thanks, Doc, I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure. I appreciated the political thesis."

Forrest grinned. "Hope I didn't run off at the mouth too much. Where Jack Crane is concerned, I tend to get pretty opinionated."

"Oh, really?"

They both laughed.

"It's been terrific meeting you," said Forrest, as Drummond left the 405 and joined Sunset Boulevard for the short run into the campus grounds. "If I ever need analysis, I'll be sure to call you."

With the time at just after eight o'clock, Drummond reached out and switched on the radio. And with uncanny coincidence, as he brought the Daimler to a halt and Forrest opened his door, a familiar voice, steel-hard and righteously acerbic, crackled from the multi-speaker system.

"...there are elements in this great country of ours that would bring this country down ... *Godless* elements who thrive on crime ... on drugs ... on violence ... who bring terror into the lives of decent, God-fearing citizens ... and would turn the United States of America – *my* United States of America – into a vile, drug-ridden cesspool for their own despicable ends. Well, I'm here to tell you folks - JACK CRANE AIN'T ABOUT TO LET IT HAPPEN!" Thunderous applause, cheering, whistling. Over it, quelling it, "Jack Crane spent four hard years of his life fighting the *Godless* in someone else's country ..." more cheers, whistles, shouts of approbation, "... but that fight was *nothing* to what you're going to see around *here* when I get to the White House!"

Tumultuous applause, and as it subsided, "I hear there's another guy in this contest. I haven't actually seen him, myself, because he's such a nonentity he tends to disappear into the wallpaper!" Roar of laughter. "But I hear things about him. I hear he's hot on education – which is just dandy, provided we've got any schools and students *left* after the muggers and the pushers and the arsonists have finished with them. And I hear he's hot on rehabilitating criminals ... and on disarming the people, so they can't *defend* themselves against the criminals, who are going to be the only ones who do carry weapons! My, my! What a glorious day for this great country if, God forbid, *he* should get into the White House. Well, folks, I'm here tonight to tell you . . . JACK CRANE AIN'T ABOUT TO LET IT HAPPEN! . . . JACK CRANE AIN'T ABOUT TO LET IT HAPPEN! . . . JACK CRANE AIN'T ABOUT TO LET IT HAPPEN!..."

As the audience took up the chant, filling the car with deafening, hysterical fervour, Drummond switched off the radio and raised his brows to Alan Forrest.

Forrest grinned. "There's just *nothin'* like the smell of napalm in the morning. Apocalypse Now." He held out his hand. "Thanks a billion, Doc."

"Good luck, Alan. Listen, if you need help – call. I don't mean therapy. Any help at all."

"Thank you."

He watched Forrest walk away, turn and wave, and disappear into the trees.

Driving out onto Sunset Boulevard, Drummond again switched on the radio, catching a political commentator in mid-sentence. "...tone of his entire campaign since the Republican convention. Crane rode to state power on his war record and he's doing it again now. He's a warrior – and he's selling war ... war against crime, poverty, drugs, violence..."

A female voice cut in. "Yes, fine, but these are mostly urban matters. What does Jack Crane know – or care – about the broader issues? How knowledgeable is he about foreign affairs? Where does he stand on national defence? All I seem to have heard from this guy throughout his entire time on the stump has been a kind of jingoistic jackboot march back to a nineteen-thirties' isolationism."

"Well," said the male voice, "time and the television debates will tell. Milton Byrne is bound to hammer this very point."

The woman laughed scornfully. " 'Hammer' is not a word one uses in association with 'Milton Byrne', Cy. And certainly never in Jack Crane's presence. Byrne is already reeling from Crane's attacks. I really can't see much changing in the debates."

"Well, as I said, time will tell. That's all from the campaign trail for now ... back to the newsroom for."

Drummond turned off the radio. "Jingoistic jackboot march" he mused aloud. "Nice ringing phrase."

As he passed beneath the 405, heading for Malibu, he added mentally: nice . . . and deadly.

Chapter Three

Drummond turned off the coast road, parked on a gravel frontage, and used a key to open the street door. He entered a paved courtyard, shaded by citrus trees and landscaped with numerous flowering shrubs – bushes and climbers – set in wooden and earthenware pots, tubs, urns and barrels. Against the right wall blazed a colourful rockery. The yard had been Vivian's creation, her pride and joy.

Near the house, the yard descended steeply in crazy-paved steps. Drummond felt the spectral presence of ennui as he unlocked the solid oak front door and entered.

At once, the past was upon him. It was as though the shutting of the door activated a time warp. He could smell her perfume. The voice of commonsense said: floor polish, sensory delusion. But his heart wouldn't wear it; he could smell her perfume.

Doors to two bedrooms, a cloakroom and a guest bathroom led off the stuccoed, white-tiled hall. At its end, wide stone steps descended into a glorious oak-floored living room, its furnishings light and colourful, desert tones of sand and green and turquoise predominating. An open, fieldstone fireplace occupied the right wall; to the left, an archway led to the kitchen.

The house was immaculate, cleaned every Thursday and aired every Sunday by a diminutive Filipino lady, Mrs Foy, who also replenished Drummond's refrigerator with his modest needs.

He crossed the room and drew heavy, sun-proofed, bleached-cotton drapes. A wall of glass with sliding doors revealed an elevated wooden deck and a view of Surfrider Beach and a gentle Pacific Ocean.

Drummond unlocked and slid back the doors, stepped out, leaned on the wooden rail and sniffed the air. In this second week of October the weather was still good, temperature in the high seventies, the air pollution bearable. Still, it smelled tainted, and nothing like the desert.

There were a few kids out with their boards, making the most of an indifferent swell, and on the beach walkers and joggers abounded. On the deck of the house to his lower right, a nubile, blonde, topless air stewardess, one of three who rented the place, sat cross-legged in perfect yoga composure; on the deck to his lower left, a young male actor, a current soap-star, reclined on his lounge, reading a script. Everything Malibu-normal. It was as though he'd never been away.

Returning to the living room, he switched his mind to business, ignoring the house. With practice he had learned to live within it, without being a part of it. To help, he had removed all intimate reminders of Viv, all photographs, all personal possessions.

Immediately after the murder, when instinct urged him to get as far away from the house as was geographically possible, he had consulted a Psych colleague, needing help, intellectually aware that, in grief, abandonment of the home was a bad move, yet emotionally unable to practice what he professionally preached. Gradually, however, he had been able to fashion an attitude which comprised a degree of denial, the exact nature of which he never did dare stop and analyse.

Now, he simply used the house, dwelt there, without mentally touching its walls or artefacts, shutting things out, like the long-time occupant of a haunted house who knows things are happening on the edges of his vision, but never turns his head to verify.

He checked his answer phone. Three calls had come in since the previous evening. He played back the tape. Two, he sensed, were pitches. The third made him smile.

He called the first two, rejected offers of help to manage his financial affairs and cleanse his water supply, then played the third tape again.

A breathy, overtly sensuous Monroe voice whispered, "Doctor, I keep having this *terrible* nightmare. I'm sunbathing on my deck in the absolute nude . . . and suddenly I just *know* there's someone ogling me. I turn my head – and there he is, on the deck of the house next door. And he's *gorgeous*. I fancy him so much my teeth ache. And now comes the awful part. I wave to him, invite him over . . . and he can't see me! Does this mean I'm transparent or what?"

Now another female voice, jokingly terse, "Gimme that damn phone. Hi, Paul, this is Grace, that was Tilly. What Feather-head was trying to say is – all *three* of us have this *terrible* nightmare . . . no, sorry, I mean, we're having a tiny farewell bash on Friday night for Lou who is marrying some zillionaire creep who owns Venezuela, and we'd be absolutely knocked out of our socks if you could join us. Do try."

For a fleeting moment he felt the stir at the image of the lovely Tilly, meditating half-naked on the deck next door, and of the equally beautiful Grace, either of whom, he knew, would be sexually available to him should he give the sign. A tempting, impossible image.

Dispelling it, he dialled their number, got a machine, expressed his congratulations to Lou and regret that he'd be out of town.

Then he occupied himself loading and checking the video and recording equipment he would need for the forensic hypnosis session.

The West Los Angeles Police Station is a modern, two-storey structure of pale mauve stucco panels in white cement frames; it has a startling entrance faced in fire-engine-red ceramic tiles. The building occupies a corner site on Butler Avenue, close to the junction of the I-10 and the I-405 which Drummond had used that morning.

Facing the station, on the east side of Butler Avenue, is a parking lot, with service bays for the patrol and unmarked cars of the bureau. At ten minutes to three, Drummond drove the Daimler onto the lot and unloaded his equipment from the trunk.

"Hey, Doc, need a hand with that stuff?"

It was Carl Younger, a Homicide detective, coming out of a service bay.

"Hello, Carl, yes, I'd be obliged."

Younger picked up a tripod and a case of lights, Drummond the video camera case and the audio equipment.

"Hope you can get something out of this Keegan guy. We're in a bind on the Mar Vista thing."

"So I hear."

They crossed Butler Avenue and entered the red-tiled maw, its architectural style described by Dick Gage as 'early Deep-throat'.

From the reception hall they turned right down a corridor, through a door, passing the holding cells, and up a staircase into a huge room of desks and computers.

Dick Gage, in conference in a small adjoining office, spotted Drummond's arrival and came out. Gage was thirty-six, five-feet ten, with a strong, handsome face and a mop of dark brown wavy hair. Characteristically, his grey slacks and white shirt looked rumpled, his tie loosened to mid-chest.

He hit Drummond with a broad grin of genuine pleasure at seeing him, ran a teasing eye over his friend's appearance and shook his head. "Paradise is sure agreeing with you, chum. You make me feel like a tank testing ground."

Drummond, returning the inspection and the grin, said, "Funny you should say that..."

Turning to business, Gage gestured towards the stairs, relieving Younger of the equipment.

Drummond said, "Thanks, Carl, see you later, maybe."

"In Duke's? I'll be there."

"Oh, do you drink, Detective Younger?" cracked Gage.

The Lieutenant led the way down the stairs, saying over his shoulder, "I'm bringing Keegan in at 4.30 – okay? An hour and a half to set up?"

"That's fine. Where are you putting us?"

"Same place as last time."

"Good."

A meandering route took them to a small office at the rear of the building. The usual furniture had been cleared from the room and replaced with a comfortable, fabric-covered recliner chair for Keegan, and a typist's chair and small table for Drummond.

“We’ll be through there,” said Gage, indicating a second door to an adjoining office.

“We? Who else will be observing, Dick?”

Gage gave a headshake that indicated vagueness and some puzzlement. “I don’t know. I’ve had word that the Parker Centre will be sending people down . . . maybe the FBI, too. I don’t yet know names or how many.”

“Well, that’s okay as long as they all understand the rules of forensic hypnosis – absolutely no interference or interruption, and any questions must be handwritten, initialled and passed through the door. You know the drill. Anything less than absolute professionalism will never stand up in court.”

“I’ll make sure they toe the line. You need a hand with anything here?”

Drummond opened the door to the adjoining office, looked inside, saw that a TV monitor was already in place. “No, I’ll manage, Dick.”

“Anything more you want to know about Tom Keegan? – not that we have much.”

Drummond shook his head. “Only the usual – name, address and case number. I already know too much from the papers and I’m trying to forget that as it is. If this ever gets to court, one leading question from me could negate this entire session. And as it’s pretty well the only thing you’ve got...”

Gage rolled his eyes entreatingly. “Per-lease, no leading questions.”

Drummond grinned. “Okay, get outta here, let a pro get to work.”

When Gage had gone, Drummond set up the video camera and lights, framing to encompass both chairs, and ran cable beneath the interconnecting door to the TV monitor next door.

Satisfied with the arrangement, he took his seat, switched on the camera, which had its own sound system, and a back-up tape recorder, and did a test run.

Into camera he said, “This is a test of my video and cassette recording equipment. My name is Doctor Paul Drummond, Forensic Investigator. I am at the West Los Angeles Police Station.” He added the date and time, which was also being generated on tape by the camera.

He allowed a few more frames to run, then stopped the camera by remote control, rewound both the video and audio tapes, and replayed them, opening the door to the adjoining office to check the quality of replay on the monitor.

Satisfied, he stopped the tapes at the end of the test and kept them in place. If the tapes were ever shown in court, the test would help his credibility. In matters of law, it paid to do everything absolutely by the book.

Promptly at 4.30, hearing the murmur of approaching voices, Drummond switched on all the recording equipment. Dick Gage, now wearing a suit jacket, his tie straightened, entered. He handed Drummond a slip of paper bearing Keegan’s details, and held the door open as Keegan came in.

Although Drummond was concentrating on Keegan, he was aware of four other men out in the corridor. They passed quickly out of his view and entered the adjoining office through its own corridor door. Drummond raised his brows questioningly to Gage, not expecting a verbal response, but getting an eloquent shrug that said Gage was in the dark about the identity of the men.

The Lieutenant said, “Tom, this is Doctor Paul Drummond. Paul – Tom Keegan.”

As the men shook hands, Gage said, “I’ll leave you to it, Paul,” and went into the corridor, closing the door.

Drummond’s first priority was to put Keegan at ease. Behind an easy smile and manner, he regarded the man intently. Keegan was six feet tall, muscular, with close-cropped

greying hair, wearing a dark-blue pinstripe suit of poor quality and two decades out of style. Drummond noted the nervous washing of the man's corded hands, the tension in the prematurely-lined face, the darting of his pale green eyes. Drummond, reminded of a hunted animal, felt a rush of sympathy for the man.

He said gently, "Now, Tom, I want you to try and relax. We've got a nice comfortable chair here for you. Would you like to take your jacket off?"

Keegan gave a nod, removed the coat, handed it to Drummond who slipped it over the back of his own chair. Keegan's movements, as he settled into the recliner chair, seemed poorly coordinated, though whether from nervousness or something pathological, Drummond couldn't determine. There was certainly something odd and pathetic about the man's manner and bearing.

Sitting, Drummond said, "Tom, I'd like to draw your attention to this video camera and tape recorder, both of which are now recording this conversation. Is that okay with you?"

Keegan nodded and mouthed, "Sure," but no sound came out.

Drummond turned to camera and repeated the ident he had recorded for the test, adding, "With me today is Mister Tom Keegan of," he consulted the slip of paper Gage had handed him, "four-five-nine Lomita Street, Los Angeles, and we will be discussing the events of September twenty-four of this year."

He addressed Keegan, "Tom, did anyone force or coerce you to come here today?" A headshake. "Will you please tell me why you are here today?"

Now, for the first time, Keegan spoke, and surprised Drummond. From long experience Drummond knew better than to judge a person by their appearance, yet with Keegan he'd fallen into the trap. To accompany the clothes, the lined and weather-beaten face, the gnarled hands, Drummond had expected the voice of an ill-educated man. What he heard was halting, overtly anxious, bemused, but undeniably polished.

"I'm here . . . to undergo . . . hypnosis . . . in the hope that it will . . . help me . . . recall what happened on September twenty-four. I know . . . I received a head injury and have been in hospital since that . . . day."

Drummond said, "Would you please tell me, in your own words, what you do remember – only what you remember or recall of that day, nothing else."

Chin lowered, Keegan stared at the carpeted floor in front of him, his features fixed in concentration, his mouth a compressed line, eyes glaring as though trying to penetrate a veil that denied him access to life-vital information. When finally he spoke, the word came, with a shake of his head, as a breath of despair and desperation.

"Nothing."

In the years Drummond had been practicing, and among the hundreds of anxiety cases he had treated, he had never encountered anyone who looked so lost, so totally out of control as Tom Keegan did at that moment.

"All right, Tom, now I want you to be entirely comfortable. Do you need the bathroom?"

"No."

"Do you wear contact lenses?"

"No."

"Prior to September twenty-four, had you been treated, or were you being treated, for any physical or emotional problem?"

The same effort of recall distorted Keegan's features. "I don't remember."

"Do you have any fears or phobias?" It was patently obvious that the man was riven with fears, but Drummond wanted to hear his response.

"I can't remember."

“You can’t remember what?”

“Anything!” Keegan’s hands balled into fists. “I can’t remember anything.”

“All right, Tom, just try to relax – and tell me what you know about hypnosis.”

“Not much.”

“What do you think hypnosis is?”

Keegan gave a shrug. “It’s – like going to sleep?”

“No. That’s a popular misconception. Hypnosis is a state of relaxation. The deeper the hypnosis, the more relaxed you are. But you can always open your eyes and end the session any time you wish. You will not be asleep, nor will you be under my control. Please be reassured on that point.”

Keegan nodded.

“Now, I’ll be asking you questions and we’ll be discussing events that are relevant to September twenty-four only. I will not knowingly ask you anything that will be embarrassing or distasteful. Should it prove to be embarrassing or distasteful to you, please tell me or simply refuse to answer the question, is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to use a hypnotic induction called Progressive Relaxation. It’s very simple and will be very pleasant. When you are properly relaxed, you’ll be able to speak quite easily, and don’t be afraid to move and shift position if you become uncomfortable. Is that all clear?”

“Yes.”

“Any questions before we start?”

“No.”

“All right, let’s tip that recliner back and get you really comfortable.”

Drummond left his chair and settled Keegan into the reclined position. Close to him, touching him, Drummond could feel an intense heat radiating from his body. He patted Keegan on the shoulder. “Just take it easy.”

Returning to his chair, Drummond paused for a moment, fixing his concentration, then said in a soothing, monotonal voice, “I’d like you to roll your eyes right up, as though you were trying to see the inside of your forehead, while I count one . . . two . . . three. Now just allow your eyes to close . . . just close your eyes...”

Drummond continued with the induction, fixing Keegan’s attention on areas of his body, urging him to relax that part completely, then progressing to another, from the top of his head down to his toes. By the time Drummond had reached the toes, Keegan seemed to be in hypnosis, with a significant flush in his cheeks.

Drummond continued with a deepening process, counting Keegan slowly down through the numbers, elaborating at each number with suggestions of heaviness, drowsiness, tiredness. Reaching zero, Drummond was assured that Keegan had responded perfectly to hypnosis, was deeply in trance.

“All right, Tom, I’ll remind you that we will be discussing the events that took place on September twenty-fourth, and nothing else. I’d like you to go back now...”

It was as though Keegan had suddenly been given a massive electric shock.

He shot bolt upright in the chair, levering it into the erect position. His body was rigid, quiveringly stiff, every joint and muscle locked in a rigor of shock. His eyes, staring straight ahead at a blank wall, were wide with terror, his features contorted with dread. Sweat poured from his face, ran down into his collar. White-knuckled fingers clawed the arms of the chair as though he was holding on to his very life.

Aghast, Drummond could only stare. In the thousands of hypnotic regressions he had induced, he had never experienced a reaction like this. Then, prompted more by intuition than training, he said with authority, "Return to the present, Tom – now!"

Again, there was a startling reaction, this time in reverse. Keegan relaxed with equal suddenness, slumped back into the chair, which remained upright, and keeled sideways, head lolling, eyes closed.

Drummond was faced with a dilemma. His only brief here was to attempt to refresh Keegan's memory about a past event. If, for whatever reason, Keegan was allergic to regression, the session would have to be aborted. And yet he was aware of how vital Keegan's recollection could be to the police investigation.

The question was – in view of Keegan's terrified reaction – did he, Drummond, have the ethical right to try again, to experiment with other approaches, different wording, and risk a repetition of the reaction? A convulsion of such severity might easily trigger a heart attack or snap bones, to say nothing of inducing severe mental trauma.

Deep in concentration, he became aware of the intercommunicating door opening, and of Dick Gage's arm proffering a note.

Drummond took it and read it. "What happened?" The writing was not in Gage's hand; the author's initial was an illegible scrawl.

Drummond moved from his chair, saying, "Tom, I'm going to touch you, just to make you more comfortable. Just relax exactly as you are, remain in hypnosis, and ignore what I shall be saying for the next few moments."

He eased the chair back into the reclined position, settled Keegan, returned to his own chair and spoke to camera. "What you saw was an extreme allergic reaction to regression. There could be numerous reasons for it, and finding the cause might take extensive investigation. I'm loath to attempt further regression. Another convulsive reaction might cause Mister Keegan great harm. I suggest this session be terminated."

In the silence that followed, Drummond heard an angry, "Shit!" from next door. It was not Dick Gage's voice.

The door opened slightly, Gage's head appeared and gave a nod.

Drummond said, "Tom, you can hear me now. Is there anything you would like to say to me or tell me . . . about anything at all?"

Keegan took a while to answer. His voice cracked and he had to clear his throat. "I can't remember. Help me remember."

For a moment Drummond hesitated, then made a decision. "Yes, I'll help you. But not here, not now. We'll talk about it later. I'm going to count you up from one to five now . . . and when I reach five you will open your eyes, be wide awake, feeling very relaxed and comfortable.

As Keegan roused himself, Drummond said to camera, "This session is now ended," but, as always, left the camera running until the subject had left the room.

He helped Keegan to his feet. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeh, fine." He looked anything but fine.

"What d'you remember of the session, Tom?"

Keegan frowned. "I felt good . . . nice and relaxed. I don't remember any questions, though. Did you ask me any questions?"

"Did you feel nice and relaxed all through the session?"

"Sure."

"You didn't feel . . . disturbed by anything I said?"

“Nope.” But suddenly the mask of anxiety that had previously distorted his features was in place again. “Could you help me remember, Doc?”

“I’m going to try, Tom. I’m going to arrange something.”

The door opened and Lieutenant Gage came in, his expression an amalgam of disappointment and sympathy. “He okay?”

Drummond nodded. “Tom’s asked me for help. I’m going to take him on as a private patient. Maybe all is not lost.”

Gage’s face brightened. “Great.”

Then, as though the thought had just occurred to him, Keegan said dolefully, “But I’ve got no money, Doc. How much will it cost?”

Drummond winked at Gage. “Don’t worry about money. LAPD will pick up the tab.” He handed Keegan a business card. “I’m in town every Monday through Wednesday.” To Gage, he said, “What’s happening to Tom now? Is he going back to hospital?”

“No, he’s been discharged. He’ll be taken home.”

To Keegan, Drummond said, “I’ll see you next Monday at ten o’clock, at the address on the card, Wilshire Boulevard. If you need me in the meantime, call any of those numbers, leave a message – okay?”

“Thanks, Doc. Thanks a lot.”

“Just try and relax, Tom. Once you’re back home, in familiar surroundings, your memory might well start to return. At the moment you’re very stressed, and you’re trying too hard to remember things. Give your mind a chance to heal itself.”

Gage ushered Keegan out into the corridor, but returned to say to Drummond, “I’ll be back in fifteen, give you a hand with the equipment.”

Drummond frowned in Keegan’s direction. “Will he be alone at the apartment?”

Gage nodded. “I know what you’re thinking – his name’s been in the papers and he may be in danger. To be honest, Drum, except for his address, we don’t know anything about the guy. Up till now his background hasn’t been important. But I’ll send someone with him, maybe come up with a relative who can keep an eye on him.”

Gage made a move out of the door.

“Dick...”

“Yeah?”

“Who were all those guys in there with you?”

“I don’t know, buddy.” Gage’s eyes signalled something more than puzzlement. “They didn’t bother to introduce themselves.”

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