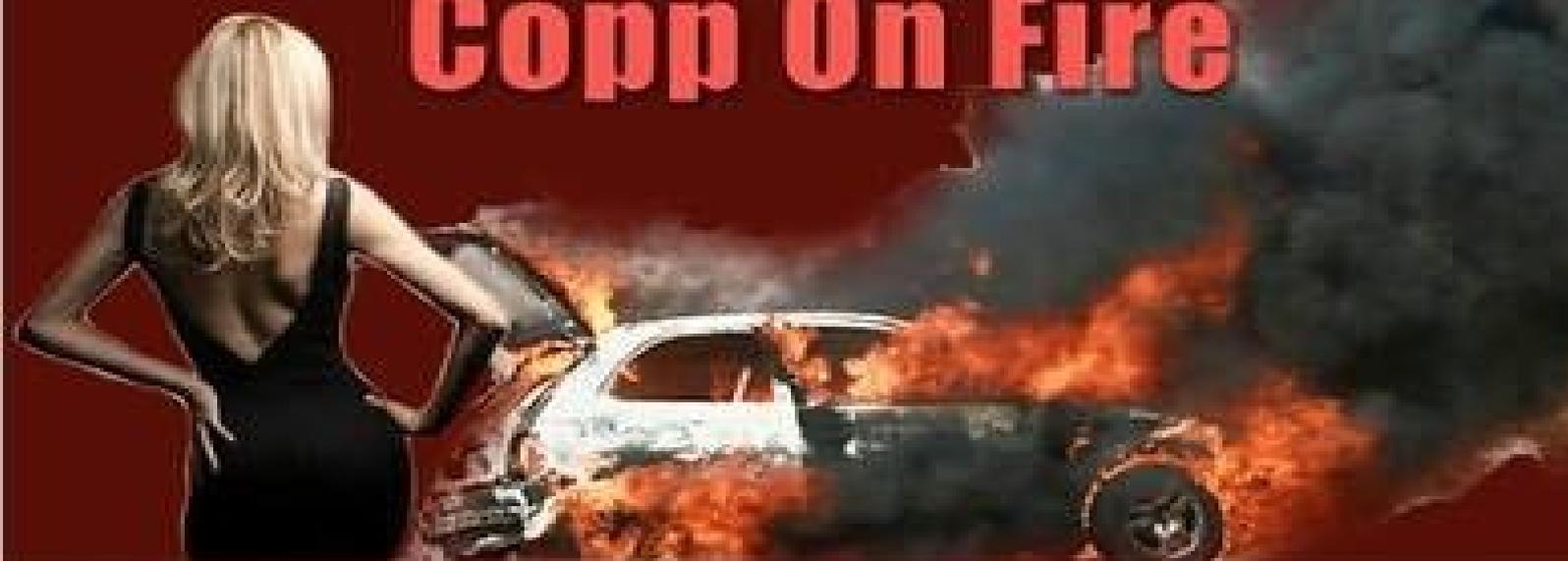


Don Pendleton

Copp On Fire



A Joe Copp Thriller

By The Creator of The Executioner Series



COPP ON FIRE

by

DON PENDLETON

**A Joe Copp, Private Eye Novel
by the creator of
The Executioner: Mack Bolan Series**

Reviews of Don Pendleton's Joe Copp, Private Eye Series

Kirkus Reviews: "Pendleton is the master."

Publishers Weekly: "Reads like an express train...a throwback to the vintage Spillane years...Pendleton knows how to keep us turning pages."

St. Petersburg Times: "Pendleton has a great new character in Copp. His style is fresh, the pace brisk, and there are enough twists to please any mystery fan."

Library Journal: "Pendleton, author of the long-running paperback Executioner series, shows his first hardcover that hardboiled writing can be insightful as well as action-packed."

Milwaukee Sentinel: "Pendleton is a master of action and dialog and 'Copp' is a taut detective story."

Booklist: "Action filled...Copp is a likable tough guy...An exciting, satisfying read."

Flint Journal: "Pendleton proves again he is the equal of Mickey Spillane when it comes to the hard-boiled mystery."

ALA Booklist: "This is the real thing, the hardcover debut of the author of the perennially popular 'Executioner series'...the charm of the Executioner books."

Arkansas Gazette: "Intriguing...believable...Pendleton's got a good story to tell."

Books by Don Pendleton

Fiction

The Executioner, Mack Bolan Series

The Joe Copp Mystery Series

Ashton Ford Mystery Series

Fiction with Linda Pendleton

Roulette

Comics by Don and Linda Pendleton

The Executioner, War Against the Mafia

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A Search for Meaning From the Surface of a Small Planet

Nonfiction Books by Don and Linda Pendleton

To Dance With Angels

Whispers From the Soul

The Metaphysics of the Novel

The Cosmic Breath

Copp On Fire

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Linda Pendleton and Judy Bullard

This one's for Thomas, who sees past the pretenses that cloak the human heart, and loves us for ourselves. Remember me to the Doc.

dp

"I never met a man I didn't like." —Will Rogers, American Humorist

". . . I, the unloving, say life should be lovely." —Vachel Lindsay, American Poet

"I never met a man I didn't like, until he takes a whack at me. Then I love the bastard, after whack him back, for reminding me that life ought to be lovelier than it usually is." —Joe Cop
American Private Eye

COPP ON FIRE

CHAPTER ONE

Death is unlovely, sure, but life is sometimes even more so. And I have known crimes against the spirit far more terrible in their total effect than any trespass upon mere flesh. Crime is my business, you see—and every time I reach the point where I think I've seen it all, something new comes along to confound and stupefy the professional senses.

But I'm ahead of myself already. My name really is Joe Copp. I'm licensed by the state of California as a private investigator. I was a public cop for eighteen years and I did it all—robberies, narcotics, vice, homicide, name it. It's an unlovely life, but I guess it's all I ever really wanted to do with mine, so by that standard I'm a successful and contented man. Most of the time. I have my ups and downs, like anyone else. By and large, I'm okay. I do like it better since I've been calling my own shots. I lost all the financial security when I went private, of course, but some things are just more important than financial security—like freedom for example. I take my freedom seriously, and I came to the realization long ago that you just cannot get freedom and security together in most packages.

So I'm a private cop now. I answer only to myself and to my own conscience. I've got one of those, sure, and I try to let it be my guide. Sometimes I screw it up, but never on purpose. Well. . . hard to say ever.

I don't take every job that comes along. Don't work for divorce lawyers or ambulance chasers, and I don't do routine insurance investigations or skiptracing. Right away there I've eliminated the beans and potatoes work that keeps most private cops in business, but I'm not in this for beans and potatoes. I prefer criminal cases. That kind of work usually comes to me through criminal lawyers, public defenders and the like operating on limited budgets, so it's not particularly lucrative. So I guess I'm not really working for the money, am I? I work for the work, and for the luxury of picking my own.

There are other moments, of course, when I snarl at myself and lecture myself to be more financially responsible. These tend to be weak moments, financially threatening moments—like, you know, when the rent is due again already?

It was, and the bank account was nearly flat, and I was snarling at myself for being so damned self-righteous when that stretch limousine drove into view. You need to get a mental picture of this. I share this small business complex in the San Gabriel Valley with a barber, a beautician, a realtor, an accountant, a dress shop and several other small-time businesses—all at ground level. We have a 7-11 store at one entrance and a gas station at the other. It's that kind of place. You know what I mean. Neither uptown or downtown—it's notown—twenty-five minutes east of the L. A. civic center, and the only real winner there is the landlord because most of the tenants are hanging onto the leases by their fingernails just like me.

So into this scene of quiet desperation let us roll a stretch limousine, a gleamingly white Lincoln about twenty-four feet long with tinted windows and a uniformed chauffeur. It is midafternoon and the 7-11 area is alive with kids who congregate and dawdle there on weekdays enroute between school and home. I have nothing against kids as long as they are a respectful minority among adults but I get a bit nervous in social situations where they outnumber us on our own turf, so on afternoons like that one I spend a lot of time at my office window where I can keep an eye on the little darlings as they spill in

my parking area with their slurpees and quart-size cokes and what have you.

~~Which is why I spotted the limousine coming in. My first idle thought was that the guy picked~~ hell of a place to run out of cigarettes because he'd have to stand in line behind twenty grabassing kids balancing (or not) a doomsday confection in each hand. You'll know what I mean by that term if you've ever had a slurpee poured down the inside of your pants.

Anyway, I figured the limousine for a quickstop at 7-11 but instead it nosed on through the juvenile jungle and halted right outside my door, astride four parking spaces. I couldn't see through the tinted glass so of course I had no idea who might be inside that yacht but I did not particularly give a damn either. All I knew was that the jerk was standing across all my parking spaces and it irritated me. Not that I was saving the space for anyone in particular; no one had parked there all week—but what the hell, there could be a rush, couldn't there?—and then where would all my clients park?

So I was about ready to step outside and yell about the encroachment when the chauffeur beat me with the punch. Dark, goodlooking guy of about twenty-five maybe, immaculate in his uniform and energetic in his body language, he left the engine idling and made a beeline to my door. I have the small reception area but no receptionist, also no secretary or help of any kind. I do it all myself with no trouble whatever because it takes only one to do nothing—and that is most of what I was doing most of the time.

So I opened the door to my inner office at about the same time the chauffeur was coming through the outer doorway. I am figuring this guy has the wrong address; this is a limousine for hire and he is trying to find his pickup. I am in a lousy mood because I am bored and also a bit depressed over the cash-flow situation—all of the flow was in the wrong direction and the pool was slowly drying up—I am ready to come down hard on the guy for tying up my parking spaces.

But he showed me a respectful smile as he inquired, "Are you Mr. Copp?"

I admitted it.

He said, "Mr. Moore would like to talk to you. In the car."

I was thinking *thank you*, God but I guess my lousy mood was in charge of my mouth because my brilliant response was: "Tell your Mr. Moore to call for an appointment. I'll see when I can work him in."

What the hell, I was thinking, I'm not a drive-up dick. Whattaya mean, in the car? I don't give customer service. I don't . . .

The chauffeur was reading me, I guess. His gaze flicked about the modest office and the smile hurried in there as he replied, "Mr. Moore is physically handicapped. He would appreciate it very much if you would extend him the courtesy . . ."

So I end up in the limousine with this so-called Albert Moore. He is a concoction from a casting director's vision of a Beverly Hills mogul. A car robe covers his lap and legs. He is about fifty, give or take a couple—roundfaced, balding, a bit overweight, dressed like bankers used to dress except that the eyes are concealed behind heavily smoked glasses. I hate talking business with anyone who is hiding behind those damned things—but then, a lot of people are hiding out these days.

The mogul is not the only one present. A beautifully blond-and-tanned young woman is seated beside him. I think of an ostrich when I look at her because she is wearing the dark glasses, too, but the eyes are about the only thing she is hiding. She's dressed, sure, but in a way calculated to reveal instead of cover up, and there is much to be revealed here. Very long and shapely legs, as item one, visible all the way to the crotch beneath a mini that was not designed for sitting, for item two, and one of those criss-cross swatches of silky material that merely drape a free-standing bosom as the clincher.

I folded my six-three/two-sixty onto a little jump seat, facing them, and looked them over as they looked me over.

The guy introduced himself but not the woman. The voice was dry, reedy, almost pained—but the brain behind it seemed hard as nails, and it got right down to business.

"I want you for a ten-hour job, Mr. Copp."

"Starting when?"

"Eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Can you handle cameras?"

I looked him over for another moment before replying, "Any kind I can hold in my hand, yeah. What are we photographing?"

"A disloyal employee, I suspect," he said with a little sigh. "Perhaps more than one. I want you to conceal yourself outside a business location in Hollywood and photograph every person entering and leaving the premises. You supply the camera and the film. Use a telephoto lens and get good tight closeups of the faces. I want to see their freckles, you understand. And they are not to know that they are being photographed. Can you handle that?"

I was not so sure that I wanted to handle it. Well okay, sure, I needed the work. But . . .

I told the guy, "A ten-hour stakeout is not my idea of a fun day, Mr. Moore—and of course I would have to shove all my other work aside, and it's across town, so—"

"Name your price."

"I don't work cheap. It will cost you a thou."

"Very well."

He had bought the fee too quickly, so I bumped it a bit. I really didn't want the job, you see. "The fee covers my time. Expenses are extra. And the travel—that's another hundred, each way. The film and the processing—"

"Add another hundred for the film and the use of your equipment, but there will be no processing. You are to deliver the undeveloped film at precisely ten minutes past the hour of six tomorrow evening." He produced a manila envelope. "These are your full instructions." He counted out thirteen crisp hundreds from a breast-pocket wallet and put them in the envelope. "Cash in advance. Follow the written instructions to the letter. There will be no need for us to meet again. I trust you to do the job properly."

I accepted the envelope with misgivings. This was not my kind of work, and I did not like the smell of it. But the rent was due again, and I was beginning to like this guy. I found the lady interesting too. There was a winsomeness to these two, and sort of a vulnerability that invites gentle handling. Still, it didn't feel just right for me.

"You say your name is Albert Moore?"

He showed me a faint smile. "That is what I said, yes."

"What are you going to do with the pictures?"

"That's my business."

"Mine too. I do have a license to consider. And even a conscience."

The smile was fading as he replied, "A private detective with a conscience? Come on now, Mr. Copp. It is no crime to take pictures."

"It can be," I argued, "if the pictures are to be used for illegal purposes."

He frowned and took back the envelope. "You haven't earned a thousand dollars all this month," he told me in that pained, almost wounded, voice.

That was an item of truth, and I doubted that the guy was shooting in the dark. Probably he had checked me out, and not necessarily for my credentials only. We sat in a sort of strained silence for what seemed like a minute but probably was only a few seconds, the two of them staring at me from behind their shades and obviously waiting to see which way the thing was going to turn. I picked up a little anxiety there. The sensing I got was that I was in control, so I told the guy, "I have good months and bad ones. So I'm having a bad one. All that proves is that I'm hungry, not that I'll eat anything that

comes along. So if you drove all the way over here thinking—"

~~He stopped me with a hand on my knee. That will always stop me, coming from male or female~~ but for different reasons.

"Your ethics are what attracted me to you, Mr. Copp. This is a delicate matter for me—highly delicate—but please believe that I am not asking you to become involved in anything illegal or even unethical. I've come to you because I have been assured that you are both reliable and discreet, but of course also because—"

"Who told you that?"

"But also because you don't stand on formality. Just take the damned pictures for me, will you? You don't need my life history for that, do you?"

"I don't want your history," I replied. "But I do want to know how you intend to use the pictures."

He turned to the woman then quickly back to me with another pained smile as he told me, "My business is highly competitive. Someone within my own organization is ripping me off. I want to know who is doing it. I have set a trap. The guilty party or parties shall find reason to visit this Hollywood address during business hours tomorrow. If I can just learn who they are, then I can use them to turn the tables in a fitting manner. It's as simple, and proper, as that."

"You'll just keep quiet about it and feed disinformation to the traitor."

"Something like that, yes."

"Why didn't you just say that in the first place?" He again offered the envelope and I accepted it. We even shook hands, and I told my new client: "You'll have your pictures."

Not that I had bought the whole gag but because I wanted to believe the "simple and proper" bit. Maybe he was looking for an industrial spy, maybe not. Maybe he was looking for a cheating wife or mistress, maybe anything. You never really know, sometimes. What you try to do is cover your ass . . . and, pardon the expression, your conscience.

I needed the job so I bought the gag. That was not the only reason but it figured strongly, and even my conscience knew later that I should not have bought it. There was nothing fitting or proper about it. My client had murder in the heart. This job set my soul on fire. It is not a very pretty story, but . . .

Get comfortable and let me tell you about it.

CHAPTER TWO

So the gag was an all-day surveillance of this shabby little storefront in a rundown section of Hollywood. The weathered sign out front identified the business as *NuCal Designs* and placards that nearly covered the windows gave evidence that they dealt with theatrical costuming and the like.

The location presented no problem. My van has one-way glass on both sides. I arrived early enough to get a good position at the curb with an unobstructed angle on the entrance to the building, and I had plenty of time to set up my equipment and prepare for the surveillance. My Mr. Moore was a bit behind the times. We don't do photo-surveillance with still cameras so much anymore. Mostly we use video equipment, and the technology has become so fine that we can get decent tape at one-half-lux lighting, which is about like the light from a birthday candle. I didn't bother to tell the client about that. He wanted stills, so stills he would get, and I had good equipment for that too—but I also set up the video equipment for my own backup.

Moore had not asked for sound, either, but I went ahead and aligned the audio barrels, which can pick a conversation off a windowpane from a distance.

All this is standard surveillance routine. I wasn't trying to be cute. This is the way it's done, easy as pie. After the setups I sit up front in comfort with the remotes and anyone passing by or even looking in wouldn't know what is going on there.

The van itself is never a problem, either. Magnetic decals go on and off in a whisk, and I have several different sets. For this job, in a business environment, I used *Southland Communication* suggesting a private telephone outfit—of which, now, there are many in this area. The meter maid tend to look the other way if it's a public-utility-type vehicle at the curb, and actually the utility vans are becoming as common as taxicabs in today's complex urban environments and so they seldom raise an eyebrow in any setting.

I had only two subjects during the first hour—both store employees—none at all the second hour and only four across the balance of the morning.

Quite a yawn. The client wanted a log—he'd even provided the forms for it—showing the precise time at which each frame of film was exposed. My camera does that automatically, actually imprinting the time of exposure on the film itself, so I scrawled "See Film" across the printed form and put it back in the envelope. Once the telephoto lens was focused on the setup mark, all I had to do was sit there in my captain's seat and press the remote shutter button at the appropriate times. The video took care of itself; all I had to do was change the tape a few times and I lost nothing during those brief episodes.

It was not my idea of a fun day. There was a bit of a flurry during the lunch hour, but by two o'clock—halfway through the surveillance period—I had pushed the button on a total of four men and ten women, none of them especially remarkable or memorable. I did not push it again until a few seconds past six as the employees were locking up and departing.

It had been a totally uneventful and crashingly boring day, all that I had expected it to be.

I delivered the exposed film per the printed instructions, passing it off to the same uniformed chauffeur of the same limousine at the corner of Melrose and La Brea at precisely ten minutes past the hour. He was alone in the car and acknowledged the delivery with nothing but a grin as he eased around the corner with the film in his lap.

I went on up the street and found a pancake house for some quick food—I'd had nothing but a dry sandwich all day—and I was sitting there within five minutes of the job when the whole area came alive with sirens and the heavy rumble of firefighting equipment. It was now nearly seven o'clock and I was dawdling over coffee, content to kill some time and allow the early evening traffic to relax a bit before heading home.

But all the noise and a glow in the sky coaxed me back onto the streets and flowing with it back toward the scene of the day's activities. I could not get within two blocks of it. I did learn that there had been a massive explosion and that a whole row of buildings were burning. By the time I worked my way to the barricades on foot, it appeared that half the city's firefighters and ambulances were at the scene and still the sirens were howling in.

I satisfied myself that *NuCal Designs* was indeed at the heart of that conflagration and I even had a few words with a fire captain and a guy from arson, enough to produce a bit of nausea in the pit of my stomach. These guys were talking bomb, numerous casualties.

I returned to the valley and went to work on my videotapes. I had ten hours of mostly nothing on those tapes, compressible to about fifteen minutes of meaningful activity, but there also could be useful peripheral activity—both video and audio—and I wanted to see if the impersonal staring eye of that camera had recorded anything that my own glazed-over eyes had missed.

I have a pretty neat video-processing lab, thanks to a client who couldn't afford my tab but wanted to show his appreciation and was no longer into the video game anyway, so passed his toys on in lieu of cash. I don't normally barter for services, but I have to say that I came out on the better end of the deal. I can edit, mix, combine, amplify and copy at high speed, add text and all sorts of special effects—just about anything the pros can do—and I do make good use of this equipment. I keep it at home because there's more room there, but it is part of my business inventory.

Still, it was close onto midnight before I'd satisfied myself that there was nothing obviously hot on those tapes. ~~Two different subjects had carried small packages into *NuCal Designs* but both were~~ women and both had carried similar packages out with them. There was nothing else of any real interest on the tapes. I copied the pieces I wanted and took the original tapes over to the sheriff's station and left them along with an explanatory note for a friend in the detective division, Ken Forta. Used to work with the guy, and we keep in touch.

In case you're wondering about confidentiality and the client relationship, forget it. All that goes out the window in a situation like this. Besides, I was already beginning to feel that I had been used somehow and maybe compromised, somehow, by this "client" who undoubtedly had come to me under a false name in a hired limousine. I had taken the precaution of noting the license tag on that boat—it's an easy one: Star 5, and I left that for Forta too.

I didn't really know what to think about any of it. I just felt vaguely uneasy and was taking some precautions to help keep myself clean in the matter, whatever the matter was.

There was nothing but a formless worry in my own gut to connect my surveillance of the day with the explosion and fire that followed. It could be coincidence, even if it did turn out that the building had indeed been bombed. Moore's "trap" could be as innocent as he claimed, and maybe the guy would check out clean.

I was pulled out of bed by a call from Forta at seven the next morning. He told me that *Star 5* was the property of *Starway Limousines* of Hollywood—and when had I last seen that car?

I told him.

He said, "That's very interesting."

"What's so interesting?"

"The vehicle was destroyed by a car-bomb at about eight o'clock last night," he informed me. Only a cop can do when he's speaking for effect. "So were its two occupants."

"Really."

"Uh huh. The boss wants words with you, Joe. Come on in."

So of course I went on in. I was involved, it seemed, in something considerably less benign than a disinformation campaign. Could I even be regarded as an accessory to murder?

If so I could stop worrying about the financial-security angle. The state takes full care of all the stupid folk.

I didn't know what I'd done, for whom or to what effect. And I was scared to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

I had a rough two hours with the county of Los Angeles. Forta's boss is not what most of us would call a nice guy. He's vain, self-important, politically ambitious. We had equal rank when I was with the county, but even then he was commanding a desk downtown and we had occasion to butt heads a few times. Now he's a division commander—but I'm not going to say which one and I'm not even going to call the guy by his real name; he's the kind that would sue me. Let's just call him Edgar.

I met Forta at the substation and we went downtown in his car. Edgar had a hard-on for LAPD. He never pass up an opportunity to embarrass them in any small way, and he near trembles like with passion over a chance to upstage them. I think this all started when Daryl Gates, the L. A. chief, snubbed Edgar at a joint press conference some years back. That is how small this guy is.

Anyway, I tumbled real quick to his movement with me. My office is located in an area that is under the direct jurisdiction of the sheriffs department; my town contracts the services from the county. The two bombing incidents—which right now were the hottest items in town—occurred in LAPD jurisdiction. My possible involvement in the bombings opened the door for Edgar to launch an independent investigation.

This guy was in hot pursuit for my butt and I knew it. He wanted to at least establish a reasonable basis for an interest in the case, one that he could sell upstairs.

So, as I said, I had a rough two hours.

Edgar knew that I had not consciously conspired to kill, maim or inflame in Hollywood. But he did want to entertain the notion, and he's clever enough to put together a few little inconsistencies to make it look like maybe I had.

Why, for example, should someone pay me thirteen hundred dollars to take fourteen snapshots of a building he was going to burn down that same evening?

Obviously, I replied, the two events are not connected.

Then why did I elect to betray confidentiality and turn my evidence over if I had not thought there was a connection?

Because I had thought that possibly the camera could have picked up something that would lead to the identity of the bomber, so I wanted to make it available for close scrutiny.

Why had I not turned the tape over to my client?

Because the client had not contracted for the tape. He'd asked for stills. He got the stills.

Well, if the client had not contracted the tape, why had I gone to all that trouble to create the tape?

It was no trouble at all. The equipment was right there. I used it.

To what end?

For my own records. (Weak, weak.)

Do I always keep such records?

Not always.

So why this time?

Well, I really knew nothing about the client, and he was acting mysterious and didn't even want me to see my own pictures . . . No, that's not right, a lot of afterthought is coloring this—I had nothing like that in mind at the time—it was just a backup, that's all, a backup in case the other equipment went haywire.

But I'd just said that I don't always use backup systems.

I'd just said no such damned thing. What I said is that I don't always keep a videotape record.

Back off. I think it should be very obvious why I brought in this tape. Now if you can't see the obvious, then give me back my damned tape. I didn't come in here to . . .

Sure, I played right into his arrogant little hands. He pushed my buttons and I reacted the way he knew I would. Now he's got a belligerent suspect in hand and he's beginning to squeeze.

If I'd completed the assignment at six o'clock and delivered the film a few minutes later, how is it that I was still on the scene when the building blew at seven o'clock?

Had I actually placed the film in the chauffeur's hand at the corner of Melrose and La Brea?—or didn't I in fact get into the limo at that point for another meeting with my client? And was there really any film, after all?

Could I verify my whereabouts during the two hours between six o'clock, when I completed the assignment, and eight o'clock, when the limousine exploded and killed its two occupants?

Did I in fact shoot that video on the day in question, or was it shot at some prior time to check on the movements in and around that doomed building?

Could I offer any explanation for why my client was killed in a second bombing even before the flames from the first had subsided?—and would I consider that a deliberate act of murder or as a ironic accident?

And would I, finally, keep myself available for further questions in the matter?

I told the guy to go to hell and went out of there in a rage. Forta was sympathetic, but after we returned to his car he pointed out, "He did ask some valid questions there, Joe."

I had to admit that was true.

I also knew that I was lucky to walk out of there with my license intact. It takes a full hearing to revoke it entirely—and some very good evidence of criminality or "malfeasance" to make it stick—but any department anywhere in the state can temporarily suspend a license in their jurisdiction pending formal charges.

I told Ken Forta, "Valid questions, sure, but the guy already knows the answers. He just wants to stand on my nose to reach into Daryl's cookie jar, and you know it as well as I do. I asked you to convey that tape to LAPD, Ken. Why didn't you do it?"

"I did, after I made a copy for the boss. I've been up all night on this thing. It's going to be a hot potato, make no mistake about it, especially once the facts are made public."

"What facts are those?"

"Well, I mean, you know, the true identity of your client."

I was getting the tickles at the back of the neck. "What true identity is that?"

"Well, I just meant—I figured you knew—one of the men who died in the limousine—you didn't know that?"

"Know *what*?"

"It was Bernie Wiseman."

"*What* Bernie Wiseman?! The guy at—?"

"The president at United Talents, yeah. That Bernie Wiseman. You didn't know? Joe, I figured you were just standing on confidentiality. You really didn't know?"

Of course not. I really did not know a thing. I was just a hungry jerk hired by the wonder boy of motion pictures to close a trap on his enemies, and the trap had closed on him—maybe me, too—before I could even know who I was looking for.

United Talents under Wiseman had scored box-office smash after smash and was moving in on the network and pay-television markets.

Wiseman had just survived an inside power play to oust him as head of the studio. He'd been reconfirmed by his board of directors and given an even stronger hand in his stated determination to dominate the entertainment industry, and he'd been the talk of the town for weeks.

All that, of course, was strictly outside my league so I knew nothing but the name and the tal

~~— So how was I supposed to recognize the guy when he came calling in a rented limo and a fal~~
identity?

It would take a while to quiet my head and try to pull the pieces together.

As it turned out, I did not have that kind of time. I'd been written into a crazy Hollywood script as an entirely expendable character. I would have to awaken to that truth very soon ... or burn with it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Forta took me on over to the city of Los Angeles and introduced me to Abe Johnson, the guy in charge of the investigation for LAPD. Johnson gave me an enthusiastic handshake and acted like we were old friends too long parted. I couldn't remember him. He asked, "How does it feel to run naked through the wild and woolly jungle with no paydays and no benefit package?"

"Wild and woolly..." I said, trying to place the guy. I was with the city for a while, some years back and I was sure I'd never worked with the guy; my memory is not that bad. Johnson is black and a native of Arkansas, big guy with an engaging smile and interested eyes. LAPD does not hire upper ranks from outside the department, they promote from within. I approve of that. You don't make lieutenant quickly at LAPD, so I knew that the guy had been around for a while. Maybe we'd met once at a departmental social, a picnic or ballgame. Whatever, I liked this cop right off.

He said, "Thanks for the tape, Joe. The lab boys have been scrutinizing it all day."

"Anything yet?"

"Some interesting murmurs now and then on the soundtrack."

"Well, you're ahead of me there. I didn't take time to screen the audio, just ran a quick scan and picked off the video subjects for my own file before surrendering the tape. What kind of murmurs?"

"Oh, very angry sounds—from the interior of the shop, we presume. What kind of mike were you using?"

"Directional barrels. So the audio pickup was directly off the shop windows."

"They'd rattle from either direction though, wouldn't they."

"Yeah, but differently. Your technicians will be able to tell the difference. It's subtle but—"

"Well, we thank you for the tape. It could mean a lot. We got another break, too, a lead on a young woman who apparently was involved."

I had a quick mental picture of long legs and impenetrable sunglasses. I pulled out a chair and sat down and told all to Abe Johnson.

He jotted notes as I talked, nodding his head in agreement with certain information that seemed to coincide with something else he already had, but no questions and no interruptions until I'd told what I had. Then he told me what he had. I was liking the guy more and more.

"That ties pretty well. Your blond is probably the same woman we're looking for. Her name is Melissa

Franklin. She's an actress and she's been seen a lot recently with Wiseman."

"How did you tie her in?"

"She was observed by one of our traffic units getting out of the limousine just moments before it exploded. She moved to another vehicle that was parked at the curb just behind the limousine. The kids on traffic detail would never miss one like this. Our boy watched her pull away and even noted the license plate on her car. He was half a block down the street and right behind her when the limousine blew. She kept right on going but he doubled back immediately to cover the trouble."

"But he had her tags."

"He had 'em—we love these personalized tags, you know. They stay in the mind."

"I'd like to meet the lady."

"Don't worry, you will. Soon as we run her down. Hasn't lived at her DMV address for more than six months. Wiseman's place is in Bel Air, and apparently he lived alone. The housekeeper knows Melissa Franklin but not much about her. But we'll run her down."

I glanced at Ken Forta as I asked Johnson, "Is there any question about the car bomb? Could it have

been accidental?"

"~~We wondered about that after we got your report—but the explosives were fixed to the frame of the vehicle and wired to a timer. It blew straight up through the floorboards, the gas tank exploded to~~ Made a mess, Joe. We were lucky to get ID on the victims."

"How good is that ID?"

"Good enough. Wiseman had hired the car for the

day but he took it as your same Albert Moore. That corroborates your report. He wanted to pay cash but he also wanted to use his own driver, so the agency insisted on a cash or credit security deposit equal to the replacement value of the vehicle. So the guy calling himself Albert Moore showed up with a credit bond drawn on United Talents under the signature of Bernard Wiseman. In other words, the studio is guaranteeing the security of the vehicle but it's checked out to Albert Moore."

"And the driver?"

"The driver is Albert Moore. We've verified his chauffeur's permit with DMV."

"No—you see, Abe—Albert Moore is—"

"I know, I know." Johnson waved me off. "But there really is an Albert Moore—or *was*—and I really was a chauffeur on United Talents' payroll, drove a limo every day almost identical to the Starway vehicle. Moore rented the limo and United Talents guaranteed the security. Maybe it sounds too cutesy but it would work to keep Wiseman's name out of the record if things had gone okay. So what do you think was going on, Joe? Why did Wiseman go to all that trouble to conceal his identity?"

"Seems obvious. I get it a lot. Bashful clients, I mean. As for the rented limo, same logic. He didn't want to use a car that could be traced to his true identity ... I'd like to see the remains."

"Be my guest, but even his own mother wouldn't recognize . . ."

"So how'd you ID?"

"Mostly medical and dental records, but there were other bits to nail it down."

"Any chance it was not Bernie Wiseman in that car?"

"I'm satisfied it's him," Johnson said. "He left the studio with Moore at noon yesterday and hasn't been seen since." He opened a folder, produced an eight-by-ten color photo, handed it to me. "That your man?"

I couldn't be sure. The man pictured in that studio still seemed a bit younger and thinner than the one I'd faced in that limo outside my office. The hair and style looked the same. I tried to visualize the face in the photo with dark glasses covering the eyes, still couldn't be sure.

"Was Wiseman physically handicapped?"

"Paralyzed from the waist down."

"It's him."

"Sure?"

"No."

"Pretty sure?"

"Almost."

"What are you making, Joe?"

"Find out what the head of United Talents would gain by staging his own death."

"Okay. On the surface I'd say nothing. He's been riding the top of the wave around here lately. Worth much more alive than dead."

"You sure?"

"No, but it figures."

I stood up, looked at Forta, told Johnson: "I'd figure it some more. You asked about the will and woolly? I can pick my own, pal, that's how it is. I would not pick this one."

We chatted a bit more as Johnson escorted Forta

and me outside. I learned that the arson team was still at work in the bombed-out building and that ~~they were saying nothing pending their final conclusions~~; Johnson was a bit irritated about that because he had two homicides connected with that one too—derelicts who'd been buried under the debris in the alleyway. The three of us hoo-hooed a bit about the agonies of conflicting personalities and the division of responsibilities in criminal investigations, then Forta took me back to my car and asked him about Abe Johnson along the way.

"You don't remember him?"

I said I couldn't place him.

"That's weird," Forta said.

"Why?"

"He's the guy."

"What guy?"

"The guy that Angie was . . . involved with when she divorced you. I think they're married now."

"Well, I never met the man. That's why I didn't recognize him."

"That all you have to say about it?"

"What'd you expect?"

"Well, you spoiled all my fun. I kept waiting for you to wake up and put the guy on his ass."

"Hey, we're talking seven, eight years ago. Besides, he seemed like a nice guy."

"I don't believe it. You're not the same guy I used to know, Joe."

"I hope not."

"That guy was screwing your wife."

"She was screwing him back. The marriage was dead before that started."

"You've really changed, pal," Forta said with a disappointed sigh.

Not really, not all that much. Don't know how I got the reputation as a hardass. Angela tried to be a proper wife and I tried to be a proper husband, but it fell apart. I think maybe I could make marriage work now. But I don't expect to try again. No reason why Angela shouldn't. And I really did like Abe Johnson.

The question I would have to ask myself was did Abe Johnson like me? Because I was going to be needing all the support I could get, from wherever.

The missing Melissa Franklin was waiting outside my office when I got back, scared and looking for protective arms.

So much for the wild and woolly jungle and picking your own fights.

It is not a one-way world. What goes around, comes around. And sometimes the fight picks you.

CHAPTER FIVE

Melissa Franklin was one hell of a beautiful woman, and there was something even beyond beauty that reached out and touched you by her close presence, a magnetic sort of something that made you want to get even closer. A tall girl, mid to late twenties, with the new-woman fitness look, an aerobic workout look, and you knew that even her sweat would smell good.

The car she was driving fit the image very well, and it was as memorable as its tags. Personalized plates on the red Jaguar XJ-6 proclaimed that someone had PAID DUES for the pleasure of driving it, but none of that joy was presently in evidence. Our eyes met as I pulled in beside the Jag and I could see misery and fear flare into something like relief or hopeful anticipation before she clouded the gaze and covered the emotion with a blank stare.

She reacted immediately and unlocked her door on the passenger side when I rapped the window with a knuckle, but she averted the gaze when I slid onto the seat beside her. I kept one foot on the ground and the door open—as much to reassure the lady as anything else—and I gave her a chance to speak first, but she didn't seem to know how to start, so I started for her.

"Waiting for me, Melissa?"

She kept her attention on the steering wheel. "Yes, but I'm not sure I know why. How did you know my name?"

"A traffic cop made you leaving the scene just before the limo exploded. They want to talk to you. You need to go in."

She sat with shoulders hunched, hands on the steering wheel while I wondered what was going on inside her lovely head. She was dressed in a leather jumpsuit with slits up the legs. Her top had a neckline that plunged. When she turned her eyes onto me they sent electricity.

"Promise me you'll never wear sunglasses again."

"What?"

"I couldn't see your eyes the other day. They're too good to hide."

"I don't understand."

"When you came here with Bernie."

"I've never seen you before in my life," she said in a tone usually reserved for a statement of the obvious.

I chewed that for a moment. "So why are you seeing me now?"

"I'm trying to find Bernie."

"If you've never seen me before in your life, how'd you know to start looking here—and how do you even know who I am?"

She tossed that golden head and gave me a sidewise flash from the eyes. "I've known about you from the beginning," she told me. "I helped Bernie select you. Now I want you to help me find him. I'll retain you. Name your price. I can afford it."

I ran a hand along the leathered interior of the Jag and replied, "I'm sure you can. But there's no need. I don't know your game, Melissa, but I know that you know that Bernie is dead. You were within sight of it when his car blew up last night. So why would you be trying to find him here? The county morgue is—"

"Stop that. The man in that car was not Bernie Wiseman. You know that as well as I do."

"I know nothing," I replied quietly, patiently. "If it wasn't Bernie, then who?"

She was teary. "Don't try to tell me that you weren't in on this, I know all about it—"

"Exactly what do you think you know?"

"I know that Bernie was coming to see you. He was setting something up, I know that. And I was supposed to meet him in Hollywood last night, afterward. I know that. But the man in the car wasn't Bernie. So where is he?"

I took my time lighting a cigarette, then blew the smoke outside. "This is getting ridiculous, kid."

She agreed, but with a lot less patience than I was showing. "It sure is!"

"Let's start it again. You and Wiseman came here two days ago in a rented limo and under false colors. He posed as a man named Albert Moore and hired me to sit outside *NuCal Designs* and photograph the comings and goings all day yesterday. I delivered the film to his chauffeur at a few minutes past six. At about seven o'clock *NuCal* blew and took most of the neighborhood with it. An hour later the rented limo blew and took Wiseman and his chauffeur with it. But it didn't take you with it, because you beat it away from there moments before the blow. A traffic cop saw you transfer to the car and he made a note of your license tags. The homicide people are interested in your close escape; they want to talk to you about that. It would look better if you found them instead of vice versa."

It was late afternoon. I wanted to get inside and check my machine for calls while there was still some business time left in the day. It wasn't that I was indifferent to this lady's problem; I just didn't see that I could add anything worthwhile to her game on her terms. So I left her sitting there in her emotional stew and I went on into my office.

She followed quickly and joined me inside before I could get through the reception area.

"They want to kill me too!" she announced breathlessly. "You've got to help me!"

I gave her a cold stare as I replied, "I don't have to do a damned thing, kid. But I've been known to do quite a lot when I'm properly asked."

"I'm asking you," she said miserably.

"Didn't hear it," I said. "What did you ask?"

"Will you help me?" she muttered.

I opened the inner office and invited her inside. I didn't know if I could help her or not. The lady certainly had my attention, though and I was willing to try. But then something rushed out of the office behind me and exploded against my head with a flash of pain and nausea. I grasped the significance of that feeling but I could not follow it intellectually; it felt like death, like dying and spinning into a bottomless chasm and being too sick to care. I must have gone out like a light because I do not even remember hitting the floor.

I came out of it with Ken Forta and two uniformed deputies bending over me. I felt very sick and very weak, and my head was like ten Margarita hangovers. Someone growled, "Look out, he's going to puke," and someone helped me turn onto my side. I retched a couple of times but nothing came up. The nausea began fading, though, and I became aware of blood in my hair.

I sat up and put a hand to the wound, couldn't feel any brain tissue spilling out, decided I'd live. Someone grabbed my hand and slapped a cuff on it.

Forta growled, "Take that off!—take it off!"—and the cuff magically slipped away.

I muttered, "What the hell is going down, Ken?" and tried to get to my feet but couldn't even find my feet.

Forta said, "Sit still, Joe. For God's sake, just sit there and behave yourself until the medics get here."

I said, "No, no, you don't understand," but then neither did I. It was all jumbled and weird, and became even more so. I think probably I was slipping in and out of consciousness, because I don't remember seeing the paramedics until we were inside the ambulance, then I saw them again at the trauma center as I was being wheeled into the surgery.

It all came back, in there, as the doctor and two nurses were doing things to my head. I saw Ken

Forta standing just outside the door with a worried face and the two deputies leaning lazily against wall and looking bored. I called over, "Ken! Is the girl okay?"

He just smiled at me, and a nurse shushed me, and the doc went on doing things to my scalp.

I yelled, "Goddammit, Ken! Is she okay?"

The nurse again tried to intervene but the doctor told her, "It's okay, we're finished. Let the officer come in." He told Forta, "Superficial, he'll mend. He's all yours."

I wondered what he meant by that, but I should have known by the look on Forta's face.

The uniforms came into the room while Forta recited my rights to me.

I said, "What the hell is this?"

He said, "Sorry, Joe. It's a collar. Suspicion of homicide."

"Aw no," I said. "She was alive and well when my lights went out. I had nothing to do with it."

He told me, "I believe you, Joe, even though I don't know what you're talking about." He bent down to whisper, "Shut up, dammit, until you've got your lawyer."

Then the uniforms pulled me off the table and cuffed me.

It became very real, then. It was not a nightmare. It was entirely real, and I was under arrest for murder.

The charge was conspiracy to murder. The list of victims was long, and growing hourly.

But Bernard Wiseman and Melissa Franklin were not on that list.

CHAPTER SIX

Edgar's charges were several pages long. He was challenging the medical identification Wiseman and he was trying to tie me to a criminal conspiracy.

According to Edgar's theory of the case, Wiseman had enlisted my services in an effort to identify certain business enemies and then to eliminate them.

Quite a few had been eliminated.

I was surprised to learn that five had died in the *NuCal* bombing—the two indigents that I mentioned earlier plus another three John Does of whom bits and pieces were discovered inside the building.

Another two John Does died in the limo.

Four more connected persons had died during the next twenty-four hours—three women and a man, all of whose names meant nothing whatever to me. I'd just taken their pictures during my surveillance of *NuCal*. Each had been shot once in the head, execution style. The man was carrying one of my business cards.

The arson investigators had determined that the bomb had detonated in a back room of *NuCal*. They described that back room as a "film lab." Two of the head-shot women had been employees of *NuCal*, which supposedly dealt only in costume design, but one of those victims also worked as a respected freelance film editor.

Edgar's theory had me implicated right up to just short of planting the bombs and pulling the triggers. He even made mention of my past experience with explosives when I was at LAPD, suggesting I could have made the bombs.

He also had a clincher. Supposedly he had an anonymous tip that I had been paid fifty thousand dollars in cash by Bernard Wiseman to help him fake his own death.

The motive: a scandal brewing at United Talents and Wiseman's fear of a coming indictment on criminal charges. No substantiation but it made a good enough story to string me out and give Council a focus of public interest in the case.

It mattered not a damn that the officers dispatched to arrest me had found me unconscious and bleeding on my office floor. Edgar did not even wish to discuss it, except for a wise comment about thieves falling out. He was trying to provoke me into attacking him, and maybe I would have if I had been myself. I was just too sick to rise to his bait. I think I had a mild concussion, the man at the trauma center apparently didn't bother to check it out. He put a butterfly on my lacerated scalp and sent me, he thought, off to jail.

Well, I really wasn't willing to go to jail, nor sick

enough to let Edgar have his way with me. And I did have some resources. I have never liked to think of friends in just those terms, but sometimes you're reminded. Mark Shapiro is a friend. He is also one of the best criminal lawyers in the area and he isn't in it for the money. Mark is about forty years old, a displaced New Yorker who came West for his bar exams after flunking twice back East. He says that the New York bar was rigged against him and that he would never have been admitted to it. I don't know why. I do know that "passing the bar"—any bar—is not necessarily a matter of simply passing the tests. Mark says it's no more than a method for controlling the numbers in the club. That may be true in some areas. Anyone who can survive the rigors of a decent law school shouldn't have that much trouble passing the bar, with appropriate cramming.

Whatever, Mark Shapiro is one smart fellow. He is also a friend and sometime employer. He had hired me to help him on several criminal cases. Law and hockey were his only passions that I'd ever

discovered. You might think that the fellow is something of a nerd, unless you'd seen him in courtroom or at a hockey game. He has a warrior's heart in both arenas, and I'd quickly learned respect him in any arena.

He was waiting for me downtown. Nobody said so but I suspected that Forta had tipped him. I know that I was glad to see him there when they brought me in. He hand-held me through all the ignominious formalities, and we walked out the door at nine o'clock on the dot. I was free on my own "recognizance pending an arraignment not yet scheduled." Better yet, my license was intact "pending further developments." All of which was a tribute to Shapiro's aggressive skills and warrior heart. Even though the whole case against me, to that point, was purely circumstantial, without a good combative lawyer at my side, Edgar would have locked me up and hidden the keys at least until an arraignment hearing.

When I was released, we went outside and stood on the steps to talk for a moment. "I can't believe those guys, trying to pull that kind of crap on you, Joe. Who the hell do they think we are?"

I caught that "we" and appreciated it.

"I mean, with your exemplary police record, to come up with cockamamie charges like those."

"Save it for the judge, pal, we'll probably need it. Speaking of which—you must know that for all practical purposes you're defending an indigent. You'll probably have to take it out in trade, so you'd better do it quick while I still have a license."

"They'll play hell getting your license, Joe."

A man's friends are his greatest treasures, especially for a man like me. I told him that and he was embarrassed. He covered it by telling me, "Be very careful, Joe. This matter is drawing a lot of press. A lot of press automatically translates to heavy politics, and that translates to pressure on everyone to look their best. That includes you, my friend, so be forewarned. I know you like to cut corners here and there. I'm saying you can't do that now, at least until we've disposed of these cockamamie charges. Don't give them any new ammunition."

I promised to behave myself, we set up a meeting for the next afternoon, he went his way and I went mine, back inside. Forta was skulking about the lobby, waiting for me. We went to the snack bar and got some coffee, found a table in an empty corner and he told me even before we sat down: "I'm not going to compromise my position, Joe, so be careful what you tell me. There's a lot of heat on. We've got friends, but let's not test that friendship in this kind of heat."

I said, "Hadn't planned to tell you a damned thing, friend. Hoping you'd have something to tell me. What about Melissa Franklin?"

"What about her?"

"You took my statement. What were the signs when you got to my office?"

"No signs at all. Your car was parked outside, the engine was still warm, your office was open and you were lying on the floor in your own blood. No signs of forced entry or other disturbance of any kind. I think the woman set you up, Joe, from what you gave us. Must have had someone waiting for you inside."

"Or possibly she was posted as a lookout and I surprised, as you say, a burglary in progress."

"Possibly. What would they be looking for?"

"Something connected to my job for Wiseman. Why did Edgar hand me over?"

"You know Edgar. He'd give up his mother to break this case. Enough to get some headline anyway. Wait'll you see the morning papers. He had the reporters in before I got you booked."

"What do you have on Melissa Franklin?"

"Some mystery there. The DMV record is confused. She's had two name changes since the original driver's license was issued six years ago." He got out a small spiral notebook, flipped it open and consulted it. "Originally surrendered a Wisconsin permit and was licensed in California as Melissa"

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