



# THE ESSENE HERESY

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## Chapter Five

### *Cooper Pedy - Outback Australia - Wednesday 18th June*

Jake drove into the south side of town via Hutchinson Street. He recalled what little he knew of the place and related it to Danica, mainly to break the silence. She seemed interested but Jake wasn't sure. Maybe she was just being nice, sucking up to him. She'd come a long way. From England, she'd said. A thirty-hour flight. Yet she looked alert, keen and unruffled - like she'd recently stepped off a catwalk.

The aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders called it 'kupa-piti', which translated to *white fella's hole in the ground*. In past times there was little reason for native Australians to live in a desert landscape where temperatures rarely got below thirty degrees Celsius, and where neither trees nor water existed for hundreds of miles around. The discovery of opals by a *white fella* in 1915 changed all that. Now there were over seventy commercial mining operations, supplying the majority of the gem-quality opals that existed in the world. Despite the influx of workers and business folk, Cooper Pedy was still a small town with a lot less than two thousand people living there - a few in underground houses the locals called *dug-outs*. There wasn't much for tourists in the area, discounting opal shops and a night-time golf course where you teed off and played rounds with golf balls that glowed in the dark. But if you asked the locals, they'd tell you that the best place to eat was at the Shell garage on Old Water Tank Road. Which is where they ended up.

Danica shut the car door and wandered ahead of Jake, seemingly in a hurry to escape the hellish heat. Inside, the garage was more like an uptown bistro than a fueling station. Soft music - some kind of weird didgeridoo composition - issued from overhead speakers. Jake had yet to understand the attraction. He made his way through nests of small tables to where Danica sat. By the window but out of the glare of the sun, he noted.

"What's a famous Boston socialite doing in a place like this?"

Jake frowned. He didn't know where to begin answering *that* question. He said nothing.

Danica shrugged. "Not making this easy for me, are you?"

"I'm afraid of knowing why you're here."

"Really? From my research, you don't seem the type to be scared of anything."

"I've been trying to get away from it all."

"So I gather. Hungry?"

"No. I ate before I came out. Do you eat?" Jake looked pointedly at Danica's slim frame.

"Like a horse." She picked up the plastic covered menu. "What's good here?"

"No idea. I get my food shipped in from Adelaide. I have an aversion to lard."

Slim, manicured fingers slipped down the menu's surface. "I fancy the burger with the lot. Does that come with chips?"

"No, they're extra. You need to go to the counter to order."

Danica stood, smiled. Twin dimples appeared either side of her mouth. "And when I get back I promise I'll put you out of your misery."

Jake watched Danica glide toward the cash register. There, the overweight attendant clearly didn't know what to make of her, couldn't quite maintain eye-contact, kept his head bowed as Danica spoke. He seemed relieved when she smiled, as though he'd passed some sort of test. Jake understood. Danica didn't have an everyday kind of beauty. She looked like she was auditioning for a Bond movie.

Danica returned and slid back into the chair. Jake heard and absorbed the smooth swish of her stocking-cloaked legs as she crossed them. *If they want to get me out of retirement*, he thought, *they sure hit me with their best shot.*

"Have you seen my show?" Danica asked. "*Strange Encounters.*"

*How's that for appropriate?* "No. I don't watch a lot of TV. Except CNN."

"Then you'll have seen the news about Harvard professor, Itamar--"

"-Leibnitz, right. Used to know him back when I was studying psychology."

"Great. That's what we thought. We want to do a piece about him. In the show. Thought maybe you'd like to help." Jake shook his head, but he could tell she wasn't going to give up easily. "Just like that? No thinking on it? No *I'll get back to you?*"

Jake drew in his breath, about to launch into his well-rehearsed excuses. But the burger arrived and the attendant hovered, most likely waiting for that smile again. Danica graced him with it and he blushed and then left, head lowered, apparently satisfied.

“I think you have a fan,” Jake said. Danica shrugged and dived at the burger, took a massive bite. Sauce oozed out and dripped onto the plate. He had to admit that there was something very attractive about her lack of self-consciousness. Oh, and those beguiling turquoise eyes. He was going to her ask her about them when she spoke with her mouth full.

“What are you up to these days, Jake?”

“I’m writing a book.”

Dimples. “Hence the need for peace and quiet?”

“Something like that.”

“Don’t you miss your radio show?” Now she mentioned it, he did. When had he done the last show? Two or three months ago? Seemed like forever. “You don’t say much, do you, Jake? Unusual for a media type. Usually can’t shut them up.”

“It’s the microphone. There’s something about it that makes me want to speak. Without it...”

“Listen, Jake, I came a long way to see you. I’ve followed your career since the ‘Boston Teen’ report. I think you’re smart, talented, good-looking and it’s common knowledge you have more money than you know what to do with. So I get it’s not about the money. We probably couldn’t afford anything like what you’d normally charge. Look, I understand sometimes we just want to be left alone - but I’d love to work with you on my show.” Danica sucked in air. “I’m not going to beg. If you really don’t want to come out of hiding and help me find out who killed your old college professor - and why - then I’ll just tootle off and you’ll never see me again. Promise.”

Danica took another bite and eyed him, presumably watching for chinks in his armor.

Jake sighed. “Guess it won’t hurt to tell me what you’re planning.”

She smiled, bits of bread, meat and lettuce obscuring her perfect teeth.

Couple of hours later they were sitting in Jake’s apartment, the air-con chilling the front room. Jake hadn’t agreed to anything except that he’d let Danica stay overnight in the spare bedroom. She’d be taking a flight back in the morning. Until then, he’d listen but make no commitment. He knew he was being awkward but he

was loath to give up his self-enforced solitude. It would mean, amongst other things, delaying his book. *Yeah right.*

They'd talked at length about Itamar Leibnitz, his work on the Essene Scrolls and the likely reasons for his death. Jake couldn't help feeling sucked in.

"My theory is that Itamar knew something about the Second Scroll." Danica was perched on his weight bench, leaning forward, a glass of Chablis in her hand. "Why else would anyone want to kill him? You know what they say. Follow the money. Or in this case, the treasure."

"But who's going to kill someone over buried treasure? Sounds a bit unlikely to me. And why wouldn't Itamar just tell the guy what he knew?"

"Maybe it's not about treasure. Maybe there's something else - something much more valuable."

"Like what?"

"Beats me - you're the psychic. What do *you* think?"

"I hate it when people say that." Jake grinned and took a sip of his wine. Danica raised an eyebrow.

*If I didn't know better I'd think she was letting me hit on her.* He shook his head.

"What?" Danica asked.

"I don't know. You're a beautiful woman and well, my guess is you're kinda hard for any guy to resist. I wonder whether you're just being super-nice to me to get me to do what you want."

Danica giggled. "Is it working?"

Jake laughed back. "Oh yeah, it's working."

They held each other's gaze. A tiny filament of desire skittered through Jake's stomach. Danica seemed to sense it and her face grew dark.

"Look, Jake. I don't want you to get wrong impression. I'm not here because I fancy you. I'm here for entirely professional reasons. My TV show is what matters to me most. I want your expertise, that's all. I want to get you into the studio and tape you doing your remote viewing thing. And I want you to give me a hand. First of all by coming to Boston - and following the trail of Itamar and his secrets - if he had any. Will you help me?"

"Boston, eh?"

“Yes, Boston - your home, right? Who knows, they might set up a ticker tape parade for your return.” Jake sighed. “Please?”

Jake said nothing for a long time, waiting for her to avert her imploring eyes. She didn't. “A week, okay? I'll give you a week of my time. Then I want to be back here...”

“Writing?”

“Yeah, that.”

Danica smiled and reached for her cell - a little too quickly he thought - and punched in a long number.

*Boston. What the hell have I done, Jake mused.*