



THE ESSENE HERESY

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Chapter Two

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Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine...

The muscles in his stomach burned white-hot. His restrained ankles and his pectorals ached. His neck complained each time he hauled his head upwards for another crunch. But his mind was focused. Pain was good. That's what all the experts, all the body-builders and their coaches said. Pain happened because the body was improving, enhancing itself, making him a better man.

Ninety, ninety-one, ninety-two...

Not long now and he could stop.

Jake Moss didn't want to think about his life. Didn't like thinking about anything much at all. If he did, he'd have to wonder what he was doing there, alone and holed up in some deserted ranch house in the middle of the Australian outback. No people for miles around. Hell, no trees, no sealed roads, nothing.

Ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five...

He was in transition, he'd decided. Off, away from his former life in Boston, leaving all that behind, rebuilding himself - literally - body and mind. Getting the grubby screwed-up past behind him, hiding until he was ready to face the world again. That's what he told himself. Some days he believed it.

Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight...

Jesus, can't stop now. Only two more to go but the pain was reaching crisis point. He let out a grunt. Persist.

Ninety-fucking-nine.

Slow. No hurry. Ride the agony.

One.

Hundred.

Jake collapsed back onto the wooden floor of the cabin. He breathed hard and stared at the ceiling, letting his muscles glow and the cold sweat dry on his face.

Five minutes like this. Then he'd drink water and start on the weights.

He was lucky; he knew that.

Most people couldn't contemplate a life crisis at twenty-nine. Couldn't afford to take off and buy a ranch house in another country. His parents' money had sure helped him there. His dear mother and father. Would they be proud of him now? He'd never know, of course. They'd been dead for just over eleven years. Actually *presumed dead*, according to the cops, the lawyers and the slimy insurance people, because they never did find the bodies.

Jake's parents had left him well provided for. They'd set up a trust when he was a kid, one he wasn't aware of until after their disappearance in South America, just after his eighteenth birthday. Mom had been rich. A bestselling self-help author with Hay House, she'd amassed her fortune from allegedly talking to spirit guides, and transcribing their conversations for the public. Her first book, *Dead Reckoning*, had been an instant bestseller. She'd followed up with three more hit books and decks of angel cards, guided meditation CDs and motivational calendars. She went on nationwide tours with Dad, her in-house manager and biggest fan, to promote them. The two of them had left him so much money he'd never have to get a real job, he'd soon realized, and promptly flunked out of university to spend more time partying and enjoying the glamour of being a celebrity's offspring. Good times, for a while.

Jake stood. He toweled his chest and arms as he made for a chest of drawers by the window. He opened it and hauled on a T. He gazed at the sun-baked desert, the bright white sky and the low range of bacon-colored mountains in the far distance. His body turned cold, despite the relentless heat outside. Shaking his limbs, he made for the breakfast bar and swigged back a mouthful of iced water from a plastic bottle. Maybe he should adjust the air-con. As usual it was set to seventeen degrees Celsius. Cold for anyone visiting. But who was going to find him out here? No one. At least no one he knew. Just how he wanted it.

Later he'd get back into the writing. If he worked hard he might get another two hundred words down. Not much according to his latest online writing teacher but, hell, it would be a lot for him. It was hard to motivate yourself for these things when nobody in particular was interested in your planned book about being a psychic.

Ex-psychic, that is.

If you could be such a thing.

Two hundred words amounted to about a page in a book - and that would be enough for one day. At this rate he'd have the book finished in, what, less than a year? Good enough. A year away from cities and people, from life, and he'd be ready to take on anything. Maybe he'd get back in touch with Mom's old agent. Couldn't remember his name. But the guy had always said he'd be interested if Jake ever wrote a book. Hell, he might even get to be a bestselling author himself.

One day.

Sure, that's the spirit.

*

"Welcome, caller, you're through to *Mysteries Unlimited*, Boston KWND, home of the brave. Do you have a question for Jake Moss?"

"Yeah, I do."

Jake recognized the cadence of his ex-wife's voice. He flinched. His eyes felt heavy in his head. He motioned soundlessly to the DJ to cut her off.

"Go ahead, caller."

Bastard.

The air inside the radio studio was stuffy, what with the DJ's cigar smoke and the lack of ventilation. The DJ leaned back in his chair and grinned, clearly amused by Jake's discomfort. Jake was tired and hung-over and really not in the mood for games.

"Yeah," the voice continued, "where does Jake Moss, alleged remote viewer, get off? When we lived together he couldn't even find his keys half the time."

"Over to you, Jake."

Very funny, asshole.

"Uh, Janet? Is that you?"

"Damn right it's me, you piece of shit fraud."

"Look, Janet, I don't think this is the ideal place for us to talk."

"Why the hell not? You never return my calls, so I figured I'd catch you at work."

Jake sighed. Why couldn't she leave him alone? God, he sure could pick 'em.

"You can't keep doing this, Janet."

"What? Letting the world know you're a fake? You told me *that* yourself, remember, Jake dearest? We all know you're about as psychic as a kitchen blender."

*

Jake shook his head to dislodge the memory. But it was still fresh, even after two months, during which time he'd lost his slot at the radio station, drank himself into a stupor for a fortnight and finally decided to get out of Boston before his sanity collapsed entirely. Interesting how a former love of your life can turn into your nemesis. Served him right, he supposed, for breaking her heart.

He paced to the workbench and sat. Changed his mind. Got up and went to find the remote for the wall mounted TV. Maybe some sound and vision would distract him. Maybe.

CNN.

Always CNN. Funny how, even though he wanted to get away from everything, he obsessed over the news. He'd paid a fortune to that scruffy hick from the computer shop in town to have a satellite dish - just so he could watch the American news, his last tie to the place of his birth - and metaphorical death.

He stood in front of the screen, only half aware of it.

Dimly, he recognized a face.

An old professor from Harvard, where he'd studied psychology back in the day. *What was his name? Something Jewish. Leider? Leiber? Leibnitz, that was it. Itamar Leibnitz, resident history professor and renowned epigrapher.* Jake had met him once while taking a short course on anthropology during a semester break. Nice man, genuine, full of passion for ancient scripts from around the time of Christ.

Why was his face on TV?

Jake turned up the sound.

"... found dead in his Harvard office, the victim of a violent assault early last night. Authorities are unsure as to the motive for the attack but a man is being held in custody who was arrested at the scene. So far, the assailant has refused to cooperate with police and national security officials. More, coming up..."

Jake Moss frowned.

Who would want to hurt a nice old man like Professor Leibnitz?

And why?

More - coming soon. For regular thrilling installments of this story go to:

<http://robparnell.blogspot.com>