



OF ASHES AND DUST

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Histrion Books

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Addison & Highsmith

Addison & Highsmith Publishers

Las Vegas ♦ Chicago ♦ Palm Beach

Published in the United States of America by
Histria Books, a division of Histria LLC
7181 N. Hualapai Way, Ste. 130-86
Las Vegas, NV 89166 USA
HistriaBooks.com

Addison & Highsmith is an imprint of Histria Books. Titles published under the imprints of Histria Books are distributed worldwide.

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Library of Congress Control Number:

ISBN 978-1-59211-178-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-59211-240-1 (eBook)

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“I have set before you life and death, the blessing
and the curse; therefore, choose life, that both you
and your descendants may live.”

— Book of Deuteronomy

Chapter 1

I looked at the screen, and — behold — there appeared a huge mushroom-like cloud, the likeness of which I had never seen, other than like those in photographs from my history book when I was a kid back in high school so long ago.

I'm not a timid man. Never have been. Decorated veteran of the Vietnam conflict, but this, this juggernaut was like nothing you could ever imagine. Gargantuan in its breadth, even more so in what it did to your inner psyche: exploding from its epicenter, then enveloping your soul, your very being, and then, almost snakelike, worming its way into your consciousness in a way that seared memory. You could never forget it — in a sense, not even beyond death — a product not so much of man's hatred of others, but, rather, of himself.

And death and the seemingly eternal darkness are what it brought to us, the survivors, the forgotten ones, like the memories I have — and always will — of gazing up into night blackness in Vietnam, trying to configure the constellations in some sickening attempt to keep grips on my sanity, wondering when Charlie and assorted Viet Cong would slither out from predawn jungle hideaways and slit our throats. But this one was IT; this was the one that spread out its tentacles everywhere. So, it is with this faraway, half-dreamlike memory, somehow burned indelibly into the forefront of my brain, that I look back at our own mammoth denial and self-delusion presaging the nightmare of living hell come riding to earth. How I survived it all, I don't know. Or have I? That is, I'm here, physically, but some parts of me, maybe most of me, are dead. Dead. Dead. Forever. I don't know what part of me left over I want to share. This is the story of survival, consummate survival. This is the story, constructed from my own meticulous diary, of those who looked over the edge, saw the past, present, and future in one glance, and tried to carry on, our egos shattered as well as the American society to which we had wedded our hopes and dreams for a better world for ourselves, our

kids, and our kids' kids. Somehow, we survived to the best of the ability God saw fit to bestow upon us.

I was already well into feeling middle-aged, fresh out from a prestigious graduate school nestled in my native New England hills and with another degree in tow, this time in the humanities, and not much else. With a newly-splintered marriage and the overall post-Cold War economy again heating up, yet with no job prospects for me within the walls of academe, my future looked dim and just plain tedious. Damn depressing. Until I met Mark Mercotti.

Soldier sphinx. Steady of hand and pony of tail, Mark had done time in 'Nam, was about my age, and like myself had gotten himself decorations pinned to his tit and nightmares pitted into his head. Recipient of the Silver Star. He had been a member of the First Cavalry Division in 'Nam and again, like me for a brief time previously, had done a stint with the most fucked-up unit in the US Army — the Eighth US Army in Korea. Not that Mark totally disliked Army life; he had been an outstanding field-grade officer with about fifteen years in service. Yet, when it came down to the long haul, as careers go, at fifteen years or so, he'd said he had had enough. Mark's last long-term assignment had been in military intelligence. Something to do with aerial phenomena.

"How ya doin', buddy?" A throaty, masculine voice that sounded like Mark's burst forth from my right. Nursing a rum and Coke as I steadied myself on my stool at the local pub, I caught a glimpse of a hulking figure lumbering toward me. There he was: tall, clean-shaven with a strong, chiseled profile, well over two hundred solid pounds, and looking like he had somehow been stuffed into his mauve out-of-style leisure suit. He wore his still-luxuriant, jet-black hair in a short ponytail and a single tiny gold earring in his left ear. Unusual, I thought, for an ex-military officer. Somebody still stuck in the 70s. "What'd you say the name of this place was?"

"Central Cafe."

"Central Cafe? Ah, yeah; that's it. Didn't have much trouble finding it. Not in a town this size at any rate."

“Good. Sit down.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you drinking?”

“Uh, make it a Budweiser,” he nodded to the bartender.

“No Buds available today, Bud. How about a Miller?”

“Uh — no, I prefer Budweiser. In that case, give me a seltzer water.”

Yes, he fit my very first impression: soldier of steady habits. “So, what’s up?” I asked pensively. The rum and Coke went down easily.

“Well, remember what we started talking about back on that hike in the Berkshire Mountains last month? The time we went out to Mount — “

A sudden commotion silently erupted to our left. It involved a young couple sitting diagonally across the counter — a boyfriend-girlfriend squabble. Couldn’t have been more than a couple of years out of high school. Then for some unexplained reason, other faces focused upon all four of us at the counter.

“Look, let’s sit in that booth over there,” Mark said, one tone above a whisper. “I really wouldn’t want this to get out to anybody else. Besides, the damn smell’s killing me.” The place was starting to get musty.

Not knowing what to make of this sudden confession, other than the fact that military intelligence had made him semi-paranoid, I grabbed my drink, and we walked over and sat down. The place, a plain no-frills eatery in my hometown’s swanky downtown district, was fast filling up with a lunchtime crowd. Yodeling cowboy lyrics from a nearby jukebox began to fill the air, and it was getting hot and stuffy.

“Look, guy,” he said earnestly, leaning over on his elbows, “I know you may think this a bit much, but I really gotta keep this stuff low, low-key, see?”

“Yeah, sure. Have to do what you have to do, Mark. So, what’s the story?”

He paused, freed his hands, and refocused his glasses, sliding down his nose from the noonday humidity, then looked at me intensely. “OK, where the hell was I?”

“‘Bout not letting this stuff out because — ”

“Yeah, that was it.” He leaned back, as if to study my reaction and have room still to notice his surroundings. “Well,” he paused, narrowing his eyes, “it all started out in the deserts of east New Mexico in ‘47. July, first week to be exact. I know what kind of stickler you are for details.” He smirked.

“Wait a minute, Mark! Why are you telling me this? Why me?”

“Well, Bill, you’ll know when the time comes. Trust me.”

I’ll never forget the way he paused, as if his revelation held some secret significance.

He focused on my face again, as if to see some hidden fear, some secret misgiving. “We — ah, I mean Army Air Corps — recovered some kind of airborne craft, initially described as a sort of flying disk. Crashed in the deserts about sixty — or was it eighty?— miles northwest of Roswell, outside some shitkicker place called Corona. There was a rancher first on the scene. Military intelligence had to get him to keep his mouth shut! We couldn’t afford to have this stuff get out!”

“Wait a minute! You’re talking about that alleged flying saucer crash at Corona, aren’t you? There’ve been shows on it, documentaries, on TV.”

“Alleged, Billy Boy?”

“Now wait a minute — ”

Everybody looked again toward the counter. The squabbling kids had started up again. The girl’s boyfriend, or whatever he was, looked back our way. Steve, the bartender, standing behind them, had a look of resignation on his face, as if he had been through this with them before.

“What the fuck you looking at?” the guy yelled at us.

I got really scared, hoping he meant Mark. Though not much more than a high school kid, he looked formidable in his dirty gray, tight-fitting muscle shirt. The kind of shirt some guys his age wear to show off. Looked like some college football tackle.

“I said, what the fuck are you looking at, Four Eyes?” I guessed he was referring to Mark’s rather thick glasses. I breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m talkin’ to you!”

“Honey, please....” moaned the girl.

“Shut up!” He rammed her into the next bar stool. Hard. Then got off his. I don’t remember exactly what happened next; I was trying to keep my mind off the ever-increasing heat. I think Mark was already on his feet; it all happened so damned quick. I do remember Mark standing momentarily just off to the right, the much-maligned glasses sitting contentedly on our table. Then it looked like the kid had second thoughts. Didn’t matter. The kid had moved too close. Mark let him have it — an open hand thrust right to the throat followed by a lightning-fast headlock. The kid squealed like a little pig. Some women screamed. Everyone backed off. There was a loud thud. Mark had rammed the kid’s head into the counter, knocking him semi-conscious. He staggered. Mark grabbed him by his ear.

“Next time, son, pay attention to what comes out of the mouth.” Mark repositioned him on his stool. The kid slumped over, his meaty arms dangling from his sides, a rivulet of blood trickling down his neck, a tiny puddle beginning to form next to his stool. The cowboy on the jukebox finally stopped his yodeling.

The kid’s girl had been standing there all along, taking it all in, too stupefied by the violence, by the speed, for any reaction. Or maybe she was just plain glad somebody had finally shut his big, fat mouth. Secretly, I think she liked it. I don’t know. Never inquired. Never said a word to her. It’s a funny thing, violence. Show it on TV, and people pay little attention; see it live, and they get sick. Most of them, at least. Unless you get too numbed by it all ... like in ‘Nam.

Folks were still glaring at us. Steve motioned for us to leave. We didn’t hang around for a second request. It appeared that Steve was familiar with this kind of scene with these kids or whomever. Besides, I was recently back in town — no need to get reacquainted with the police this way.

“Geez, you plugged him good. Damn, Mark, thought you were going to kill that kid.”

An early spring breeze blowing through the door felt cool on my arms.

Mark positioned his glasses as we made our way out onto the sidewalk and into the hot overhead sun. “Don’t worry. If I’d wanted to hurt him, they’d be calling for the town coroner right now instead of giving him that wet towel.”

We lingered awhile on the sidewalk. I thought maybe the cops would be there any moment. Wedgemont Police Station was but only a block away. I gave Mark some stupid excuse that I had to get home — pay the landlady and work on some dissertation on epistemology and Molière, or something like that — and would call him later that evening. Fact was, maybe I wasn't as inured to violence as I'd thought.

“OK, Billy Boy. Gimme a call later, huh?” He straightened out his collar, eyeing me oddly. “Hey, you're not upset that I —”

“Naw! You kidding? Who, me?”

“Oh, all right. That's good. Later.”

I watched him as he walked toward the parking lot behind the pub, pausing for a moment to peer into the pub window to check out the kid. It really was time for me to go home, yet I headed for the library to check out a few things about UFOs. What Mark had said thus far was reminiscent of things I heard when I was in uniform myself. Things I couldn't quite put my finger on, yet, like some half-foggy memory that refused to fade, jabbed at the brain.

As I look back, nothing else that afternoon was memorable save some library newspaper stories hollering about our national currency sliding long-term against foreign ones. Again. Yeah, as if that mattered to me at the time. No full-time job. Nothing.

A few days later, I was returning from the Veterans Administration to see my counselor and the unemployment office to see if I qualified for food stamps when I got a call from Mark.

“Billy Boy! What's doin'? Hey! You don't mind if I call you 'Billy Boy,' do ya?”

I said I didn't.

“Got some documents pertaining to what we've been talking about I thought you might like to have a look at.”

“You mean about aerial phenomena, pie plates in the sky?”

“Whoa, buddy. Remember what I told you about being 'low-key'?”

At first, I didn't; then it hit me. And as I was getting increasingly depressed over my dour-looking employment prospects, and I half-wanted to end the conversation quickly, something about Mark, and something about this aerial phenomenon shit, began to take on a steadily increasing sense of immediacy. I hadn't realized it then, but I had an all-too-real dream about UFOs in Vietnam. At least, I think I did.

"No ... Yeah ... Wouldn't know anything about it, really; it wasn't my business...."

I would meet him that weekend.

The day broke clear and crisp. I woke up to find myself in a sweat, sounds of screaming and goddamned helicopters exploding in my head. Mark was over to the house earlier than agreed upon. I had hardly finished shaving and he was already at the door, again in that mauve leisure suit. Christ, hadn't he something else to wear? He scanned the neighborhood, nervous-like.

We small-talked about sports and nothingness, the kind of things men say when they're still too unsure of each other and of themselves. I guess I'm not good at small talk. That's what my ex-wife used to say, right after we'd return home from something social. Bloody bitch. I felt a bit awkward and sensed the same in Mark. Perhaps it had to do with our earlier incident. I don't know. I yearned for a smoke but decided against it. I knew Mark didn't like tobacco smoke. But it was my own home for Chrissakes, even if it was rented in what was obviously the poorest section of town. I had to quit anyway.

He laid his briefcase on the kitchen table and shuffled some papers rather clumsily. One or two dropped to the floor. He knelt, kind of covering them up as if he didn't want me to see them. Not yet.

"OK, remember, for now, this stuff's between you and I."

How I hated it when college-educated guys said, "between you and I."

"Let's have a look."

He picked up the papers and laid out on the table what appeared to be several poorly reproduced photostatic copies of official government documents, begin-

ning with headings like “Top Secret/ORCON” and “Project Such-and-Such” followed by “Proword” and “OPR.” One was titled something to the effect of “For the President’s Eyes Only.” Mark pushed up his sleeves. I browsed through the copies.

“It all started right after World War II,” he said. “Like I was saying back at the pub, in 1947 in New Mexico. Some put it — ”

“Some what?”

“Some of the earlier researchers put it as early as ‘43 during the war itself, during a tryout of a little-known top-secret project called Rainbow having to do with invisibility and teleportation of warships. The Navy was overseeing it. In fact, Einstein played a pivotal role, although it looks like he tried to hide it. And you thought the Manhattan Project was secret?”

“Go on.” I put down the papers.

“The Navy was working with Einstein’s Unified Field Theory, trying to put it to practical wartime use. As it happened, it’s reported that they did actually teleport a warship from the Navy dockyards in Norfolk to — and this is where it sounds really crazy — to another dimension or something. Don’t ask me exactly where. Anyways, it was gone for about thirty minutes. It was reported the guys on board, think it was forty-two, saw spirits, alien beings, and UFOs, and the experience made them crazy. One sailor went public with it. At least tried to. The Navy shut him down and has disavowed knowledge of the incident ever since. Believe it or not, Hollywood did a movie on essentially the basic facts I’ve given you.”

“So, so why isn’t it known? I mean, why hasn’t somebody come out with the story definitively?”

“That’s it! You see, the government can’t. Can’t let it out. It’d cause too much of a panic, as lame as that sounds, and you gotta realize the whole thing, UFOs and all, is being investigated from a weapons research development point of view. Besides, it’s all so bizarre that who’d believe it at face value anyhow?”

I had been so absorbed that it was only at that moment that I became aware of my next-door neighbor’s dog barking. “And what about UFOs?”

“They’re called AVCs or Alien Visitation Crafts within intel. Anyhow, that was next, in ‘47. First time we ever got hard-core physical evidence. I’m telling you...” He composed himself. “Couple of them crashed in New Mexico, like I said. The one by Corona carried four aliens. Dr. Bronk, one of twelve original investigators appointed to an ultra-secret presidential panel to report to Truman — the panel was called Majestic-12 — nicknamed them EBE, for Extraterrestrial Biological Entities, until a better term could be agreed upon. Bronk was the one who did the first autopsies. The panel was headed by Dr. Vannevar Bush, one of the country’s preeminent scientists at the time. Ever hear of him?”

I said I wasn’t sure.

“Doesn’t surprise me. He wasn’t internationally known like Einstein. Incidentally, evidence points to the probability that the panel continues today.”

I glanced at a couple of the documents. Mark pointed out one referring to the MJ-12 panel. “You said there were ‘a couple of them.’ What happened to the other?”

“That’s mentioned here too someplace. Anyways, the crash was about one hundred and fifty miles from Corona, west. In good condition.”

“You mean occupants?”

“No, the craft.”

“Any of them ever survive?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Another crash occurred in ‘49. There was one survivor, EBE-1. He died in 1952.”

“Died in 1952? And just how the hell was this all kept secret?”

“You have to understand this was — is — considered ‘Above Top Secret.’ He was kept — I believe it was at Los Alamos. I’d have to go back and check on details. It’s all pretty confusing.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Naval Intelligence Support has primary field operational responsibility; from there information is funneled to the Director of the CIA, whose job it is to coordinate with MJ-12 and the president directly. The president might not even be fully appraised of what’s going on.”

He meant ‘appraised.’

“How do you mean, ‘not fully appraised’?”

“I mean, even the president doesn’t have the highest security clearance. You were in intel. Thought you might have known that.”

I told him I didn’t, though I had heard rumors to that effect. My head began to hurt.

“My own gut feeling is that presidents, ever since Kennedy, are not being kept appraised of all details, like many of us believed they should be.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Gut feeling.”

I had the distinct impression Mark knew more than he was letting on. I knew instinctively by now not to push too hard. “OK. Between you and me, where does that leave it all now?”

He repeated my question. “Well....” He tugged at his shirt collar, loosening it as if the revelations were making him squirm. “It means that the whole thing is the biggest secret in history.”

Obviously, I thought.

“It means that soon it’ll be too late.”

“Too late? Too late for what?”

He eyed me. Coolly. “Too late for most of us. Too late for just about every unlucky bastard on the planet, ‘cept maybe those who go underground.”

“What the f — ” I caught myself. Since ‘Nam, I had picked up the tempting habit of ubiquitous cursing. I was trying to stop. I was even told by a female colleague that I had said ‘fuck’ once quite casually in formal company, at an official academic function at that. I was surprised. Academics have to watch what comes out of their mouths, either in class or official events.

This sudden eruption of emotion appeared to delight him. It was as if he were waiting for some display of intense feelings about all this. He leaned back on his heels, making his stature loom even larger. I realized what had caused my headache. His damn aftershave lotion. Bad enough he had to wear that same silly suit. He folded his arms across his chest, enhancing his already considerable aura of authority.

“What the heck are you talking about?” I was excited.

A wan smile eased across his face; then, almost as suddenly, his manner changed from earnestness to passive engagement. “Really,” he said, “we’d better end it. You’ve had about all you can absorb for one day.”

“Wait a minute. Tell me everything!” I leaned toward him. He stood his ground.

“No, big fella. That’s it for today. Besides, now it’s my time to run. The other stuff entails religion and evolution. Too much to get into now.”

I persisted. I forgot that he couldn’t be swayed. He shook his head. I had to know what he knew. He nodded toward the papers. “Go ahead,” he said, “have another look. Quick.” I devoured the documents ravenously. I sat down to steady myself. I couldn’t read fast enough. He began to fidget.

“Can I keep them? Just to have a look overnight?”

I guess I must have looked too eager, something of a fool. He didn’t have to say no. It was in his eyes. This time I wouldn’t ask twice. He knew he had me where he wanted me.

Over the next several days, I thought of our encounter. Constantly. We stayed in touch sporadically. In a sense, that was fine by me. I had too many piddling details to attend to, like those involving my ex-wife, though I craved the answers to what he had titillated me with. Then while playing with Buckie, my neighbor’s big, long-haired mongrel, it dawned on me. Mark said that I had been in Intelligence. This was true, albeit for a short time. I’d never told him that. Or at least I didn’t remember doing so. I wondered aloud at times how he knew. I felt it was I who

was starting to look over shoulders. Events of the previous days steamrolled into my mind.

Job hunting was not going well. I was starting to get scared. Bills were beginning to pile up, and resources starting to slim down. After surviving Vietnam, I thought nothing would ever bother me again. I was wrong. My life was playing itself out like a script already read. Apply to this college department, harangue the department secretary on my status, and then more often than not, get some shitass this-position-is-not-to-materialize-after-all-due-to-unexpected- financial-exigencies answer. I constantly had to remind myself I wasn't seeking work at Harvard.

It was getting late in the spring and, as academic jobs go, time to get a bit desperate. The good thing was I hadn't heard from my ex-wife in quite some time. When we'd been in high school, Sheila had been the girl in all the guys' wet dreams. Fresh off a Norman Rockwell canvas. Now I hoped she had moved out of the area. She hadn't been bothering me for money. What a relief. It wasn't to last long. She'd lasso me when I least expected it. It was early Sunday morning. My phone rang.

"William, why in hell haven't you been in touch, goddammit? Why?"

"Uh, I don't — "

"Dammit! You know you're supposed to. What the hell's going on with you, anyway?"

"I, uh, d — didn't even thought — "

"Didn't even thought'? 'Didn't even thought'? What the fuck kind of English is that? English teacher, eh?" She laughed.

"Now, wait a minute. Calm down. Payment's on its way," I lied. "It'll be there in the blink of an eye."

"In the blink of an eye and your ass! If I haven't heard from you by the end of next week...." She let her voice trail off. There was a pause. Then she yelled, "You know what the hell you have to do! I know you're lying, not by what you say, but by what you don't."

I said nothing and just sat there in a fool's fog.