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The Eldo was doing precisely seventy-three miles an hour as I turned off Highway 14 and entered I-5 southbound toward LA. We were traveling two miles an hour under the rumored speed that would guarantee an unwanted encounter with the CHP and a speeding ticket. I checked the rear view mirror. Yep, there it was. Still there. That same red Ford F150 pickup truck that had been on my ass since the south end of Lancaster was still there. The truck sped up when I sped up, slowed down when I slowed down. Stayed right behind me. Although I had no reason to be suspicious, I was relieved when it turned off at the San Fernando Road exit.

Shocker called in a few favors from an old drinking buddy at the Department of Motor Vehicles and got the names and addresses of the three suspected Hummer owners. The porn movie director was in jail and one of his starlets had run off with the Hummer to parts unknown. The child movie star was four months behind in payments and the Hummer was repossessed and now prominently displayed on a sales lot in Chatsworth. The remaining candidate for Rolly's rundown was the Hummer registered to the president of a casket manufacturing company in Compton. I thought that seemed a strange extravagance for someone in the death industry.

At two that afternoon I drove into The City of Angels Casket Company's parking lot just off Alondra Boulevard in Compton, in the seedy south part of Los Angeles County.

Well, well, what is this? Too easy is what this is.

A black Hummer parked in front of the casket company entrance behind a sign announcing "Reserved for Roscoe Irving, President." No other cars parked nearby. The sign on the building next door identified The Dearly Beloved Transportation Company. No cars parked in front of that building.

No pun intended but this whole place looked dead. I parked the Eldo on the

other side of the lot from the Hummer and walked over for a look at The City of Angels Casket Company and The Dearly Beloved Transportation Company.

Both are Quonset-hut structures, a utilitarian and easily constructed design favored by the military during the 1940s. Each had a single man-door in the semi-circular front wall facing the parking lot with no windows. These two structures were part of a row of fifteen such identical buildings, all the same size, all covered by corrugated metal on the rounded sides and roofs, all set parallel to each other facing the parking lot, all backing up to taxiways at the Compton Airport at the rear, and all with a large roll-up door at the rear for servicing aircraft at some time in the past. The other thirteen buildings along the parking lot had signs identifying their occupants as offering airplane-related services, such as Jake's Avionics, Western Aircraft Sales, The Propeller Shop, Jackie's Pilots Lounge. You get the idea. The only other cars in the parking lot were in front of Jackie's.

I walked to the casket company and tried the door. Locked. I knocked. No answer. I felt the hood of the Hummer. Cold. Then I walked around the left side of the building. The roll-up door on the rear was closed. I listened. No noise coming from inside. I walked around the other side of the building back to the parking lot.

Then I walked over and tried the door at Dearly Beloved. No answer. I listened. Nothing. I rattled the door. Still nothing. Walked around that building and listened. No noise. No sign of life. Figuring that I was wasting my time, I walked to Jackie's, at the end of the decomposing asphalt parking lot.

I quit smoking while working at California Indemnity and usually didn't attempt to proselytize those who still enjoyed the prospect of lung rot. But my first breath in Jackie's brought on a coughing fit and burning eyes. I wiped my eyes, recovered, and walked to the cash register, behind which stood a grandmotherly lady, about five feet tall, with white hair rolled into a bun style like Aunt Bea.

"I'll bet you're Jackie."

"You got it, Bub. What's up?" she said as she picked up her lit cigarette from a scorched black plastic ashtray beside the cash register.

“I need to ask you about the casket company. Do you have a couple minutes?”

“Buy a cup and I’ll talk.”

I slid onto a stool at the counter and Jackie poured a cup of coffee that smelled stale as soon as she set it in front of me. I decided to get to the questions first and save the coffee for later.

“I was supposed to meet Roscoe at the casket company but it’s locked up tight,” I said.

“Bub, it’s always locked up until about three in the afternoon. Usually then a couple, maybe three cars pull up and the people go inside. Men, no women. Mexicans usually. I guess Roscoe is the white guy in the black wagon. He’s around at odd hours. Lot of times I see his black wagon there when I leave. We close here at seven at night, not much dinner business. We do mainly the egg and hamburger trade. None of those casket guys eat here. That’s it. So, how’s the coffee?”

“Couldn’t be better, Jackie,” I said as I put a five dollar bill on the counter and got up.

I sat in the Eldo with the top down and read the Mohave Valley News, and waited. At three thirty, two cars arrived and parked in front of the casket company. Two men got out of one car, and one man got out of the other. They knocked on the casket company door and the door opened. They walked inside and the door closed.

The sun setting over Santa Catalina Island tried but failed to penetrate a nasty looking brown and red layer of smog blown out to sea by Santa Ana winds. Figuring that I would call it a day, I started the Eldo and closed the top. But before I could put the car in reverse, I saw a flash of light in the rear view mirror as the casket company door opened briefly and someone came out.

It sure isn’t Roscoe, unless Roscoe has taken up wearing a skirt.

Although the parking lot was poorly lit, I could see the person in the skirt

opening the Hummer's driver side door and getting in. I had enough light to see that she was tall, well dressed and possibly attractive. Nice outline anyway. Then the Hummer door closed, the zeon headlights blazed on, brake lights came on for two seconds as its exhaust blasted pieces of decomposing parking lot asphalt as the engine came to life. It backed out of the parking space and headed for Alondra Boulevard. I was not far behind, with my lights killed.

Alondra Boulevard was clogged with the evening's entrepreneurs. Mexicans selling fruit and flowers in the islands between lanes. Pimps selling their usual brand of entertainment from old Lincoln Town Cars and panel trucks parked at the curb. Drug dealers implying the availability of pot and meth and the current designer drug of the day. The driver of the Hummer was more practiced at navigating Alondra and I soon lost sight of the black behemoth.

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Driving down to Los Angeles two days in a row is not my idea of the good life. But LA Central, as the main courthouse for the entire county is called, is the place to go to get hard data and good dirt on the failings and foibles of citizens who had crossed with the law in the past. To be precise, I was interested in the failings and foibles of Roscoe Irving and Evangalina Fortescue. My Internet search of the California Secretary of State filings last night showed that City of Angels Casket Company and Dearly Beloved Transportation Company were corporations, that Roscoe was president of both and that Evangalina was vice president of both. The Public Utilities Commission web site said that Dearly Beloved Transportation Company was a travel agency of sorts for people who died while on vacation in Southern California. They arranged for dead persons to be embalmed and placed in a casket and then shipped by air freight to wherever in the world they had called home.

Light Southern California rain rhythmically peppered the Eldo's canvas top as I switched between KRTH 101 and the radio traffic reports for any bad news about southbound I-5. The marine layer of wet air was forecast to drift inland and drop just enough rain to require another car wash. Through the slow window wipers I saw the green freeway sign announcing the San Fernando Road exit three-quarters of a mile ahead. I had forgotten about yesterdays red Ford pickup truck incident until now. I looked in the rear view mirror. There it was.

"I'll be damned," I said to myself, as I studied the red Ford F150 pickup truck a few car lengths behind. I wrote down the Ford's license plate number before it turned off at San Fernando Road, as it had yesterday. I tucked the note with the plate number in my coat pocket to check out later.

The Clerk's Office at LA Central is gargantuan, wide and deep, with strangely high ceilings. It has the feel of an airplane hangar. I guessed that the ceiling is at least twenty-five or thirty feet high, which might be enough room for a second story for the civil servants and their papers. This place is the repository of the good and bad in the lives of millions of Angelinos for the last 125 years or so. Pieces of paper were stamped and filed in huge green cabinets whenever someone was born, died, married, divorced, bought a house, sold a house, opened a business, sued, got sued, or got in or out of trouble with the law.

One could consume several otherwise good days rummaging through the cabinets trying to find the tracks of someone's life. Unless you got some help. I got help. Maria Cuara had been a file clerk at California Indemnity during my days as an adjuster. I had assumed she liked me a bit since she always brought me homemade pork tamales on Fridays. Now she was the head file clerk at LA Central.

Maria found what I was looking for, brought the records out, and gave me a spare beat-up wooden desk to sit and read the stack of files. She brought me a cup of coffee too. Maria took care of me.

The records showed that Evangalina and Roscoe had been married but

amicably divorced eight years ago. Roscoe's residence address in the court file was the same as the casket business address in Compton. Evangalina's residence address was listed in Bakersfield. Court records also showed that Evangalina had been married previously to Stockard Wellington. That name rang a bell. I recalled an LA Times article ten or fifteen years ago about Wellington. Seems that Wellington achieved some short-lived movie business notoriety when he announced he was producing a documentary of Southern California snuff movies with liberal usage of previously unavailable footage. The marriage was terminated by Wellington's death of uncertain cause before he could complete his masterpiece.

Evangalina's police record showed four arrests for driving under the influence and speeding and that her attorney J. Randolph Wright bargained all four down to a wet reckless with a small fine. All of those records noted that she was driving a black Hummer registered to Roscoe Irving at the time of the arrest. *Bingo*. Three of her arrests were in LA County, one was in Bakersfield. Roscoe's record was sparkly clean.

The Eldo and I had our speed pegged at seventy-three miles an hour with cruise control. I-5 was loaded with semi-trailer trucks headed north to Sacramento and San Francisco. Few passenger cars on the road so I got the number one lane to myself.

Evangalina likes the juice and likes to drive the Hummer fast. In LA and Bakersfield. And probably on back roads west of Palmdale too. Rolly my boy, we're going to do some good for you.