

AUTHOR OF *HOLLYWOOD STATION*

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THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

THE **ONION
FIELD**

"A complex story of tragic proportions...More ambitious than *In Cold Blood*
and equally compelling!" —*New York Times*

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JAMES ELLROY

Chapter One

The night in the onion field was a Saturday night. Saturday meant impossible traffic in Hollywood so felony car officers did a good deal of their best work on side streets off Hollywood and Sunset boulevards. On those side streets, revelers' cars were clouted or stolen. F-cars also cruised the more remote commercial areas, away from intersections where traffic snarled, and the streets undulated with out-of-towners, roaming groups of juveniles, fruit hustlers, desperate homosexuals, con men, sailors, marines.

Nothing the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce said could camouflage the very obvious dangers to tourists on those teeming streets. Most of the famous clubs had closed, the others were closing, and Hollywood was being left to the street people. The "swells" of the forties and early fifties had all but abandoned downtown Hollywood and were gradually surrendering the entire Sunset Strip, at least at night.

In spite of it all, Hollywood Division was a good place for police work. It was busy and exciting in the way that is unique to police experience--the unpredictable lurked. Ian Campbell believed that what most policemen shared was an abhorrence of the predictable, a distaste for the foreseeable experiences of working life. It wasn't what the misinformed often wrote, that they were danger lovers. Race drivers were danger lovers. That's why, after Ian and his old friend Wayne Ferber had crashed a sports car several years before, he had given up racing, though he would never give up police work.

He felt that the job was not particularly hazardous physically but was incredibly hazardous emotionally and too often led to divorce, alcoholism, and

suicide. No, policemen were not danger lovers, they were seekers of the awesome, the incredible, even the unspeakable in human experience. Never mind whether they could interpret, never mind if it was potentially hazardous to the soul. To be there was the thing.

Karl Hettinger was newly assigned to felony cars and Ian was breaking him in. The partnership had jelled almost at once.

"You were in the marine corps too?" Ian asked, during the monotonous first night of plainclothes felony car patrol.

"Communications." Karl nodded.

"Really? So was I," Ian said, flickering his headlights at a truck coming onto Santa Monica from the freeway.

"The voice with a smile," Karl said, and they both grinned and made the first step toward a compatible partnership.

Each man learned after two nights together that the other was unobtrusive and quiet, Ian the more quiet, Karl the more unobtrusive, but a dry wit. It would take two men like these longer to learn the habits and tastes of the other, but once learned, the partnership could result in satisfying working rapport. There is nothing more important to a patrol officer than the partner with whom he will share more waking hours than with a wife, upon whom he is to depend more than a man should, with whom he will share the ugliness and tedium, the humor and the wonder.

"You dropped out of college in your final semester?" asked Ian during their third night. "So did I. What were you majoring in?"

"Agriculture, beer, and poker, not in that order," said Karl, who was driving tonight, a slow and cautious driver who now wore glasses at night, finding he had some trouble reading license plates.

"I was in zoology and pre-med. Looks like we're both out of our elements."

"I'm taking police science courses now," said Karl.

"So am I," said Ian.

"You must know something about trees, don't you?"

"Probably not as much as I should," said Karl.

"An ag major has to know a little bit about tree and plant identification."

"I'm really involved in trees now," Ian said, becoming unusually garrulous as he always did when something interested him. "I'm landscaping my house, or trying to. You know anything about fruitless mulberry?"

"Not much."

"Well, it grows big and wide and fast. Instant shade. I like that. I get impatient waiting for things."

"You have to be patient to make things grow."

"Sometimes I think that's why I'm a policeman," said Ian. "Not patient enough. Antsy, my wife calls me. I guess I just have to be free and moving around."

"I don't know why I'm a policeman," said Karl. "It just happened. But I like it. I couldn't have a job where I was closed up inside four walls and a roof. That's the latent farmer in me."

"The best thing is that no matter how boring things get, like tonight for instance, something might be right around the corner. A little action I mean," said Ian. Karl touched his cotton shirt, open at the throat, and the threadbare sport coat. "I'm glad not to go back to uniform."

"One thing to remember is that all those working hours you spent in patrol refereeing family beefs and writing tickets and taking reports--we'll use all that time in felony cars for one thing: to find serious crime on the street.

You're bound to run up against a hot one once in a while. You just have to be a little more careful working this detail."

"Don't worry, I will." Karl nodded. "By the way, you ever cruise around behind the bar up here on McCadden? In the parking lot?"

"Parking lot? Don't think I know it."

"You just go north on McCadden from Sunset till you smell it, then go east till you step in it. It's like a zombies' convention back there. When I worked vice I used to see a lot of activity at night. Probably hypes more than anything."

"Let's check it out tonight," said Ian, pleased to see that his new partner was energetic. Good police work made time race.

"Hey look at that," said Ian on their fifth night, slowing as they passed a wooded acre in front of a white Spanish colonial home on Laurel Canyon. It was a balmy evening because the warm Santa Ana winds were blowing, and the canyon was a respite from the Hollywood traffic.

"Whadda you see?" Karl asked, twisting abruptly in his seat, tensing for a moment, as he peered through the smoky darkness in the woodsy residential valley.

"Liquid amber," Ian said, admiring the foliage almost hidden by tall shaggy eucalyptus. "You should see them in the fall. They change colors like flames. Beautiful. Just beautiful."

Karl shook his head and grinned.

Ian Campbell never noticed the grin. He watched the trees. The eucalyptus reminded him of a park in the heart of the city where the smell of tar filled the air and had once ignited a boy's imagination.

Ian had been a bookish romantic youngster--a dreamer his mother called him--and even as a high school senior, loved to dawdle for hours by the pits

and stare into the tar until he vividly imagined great Pleistocene creatures there.

The boy could guess how it was when Imperial Mammoth went to the tarpits to die. Or rather went to drink. The pool at night looked inviting to Mammoth and the ominous bubbles rising were of no consequence. Nor was the black slime that slithered between his toes and climbed sucking his ankles. Panic struck when, loin deep in water and having drunk his fill, he tried to take his first step out and found himself trapped in the tar.

Mammoth was bewildered after the first surge of terror. He stood fifteen feet tall and his curved tusks even measured a greater length. Yet with all his might he could not drag his hairy bulk more than inches through the tar. His fearful bellow paralyzed the other creatures of the forest.

The great bellowing pipe suddenly blew a plaintive blast, and upon hearing it some of the creatures were filled with grief and dread because they instinctively knew death was upon him. Many of the predators, despite their fear, were then drawn to him and themselves would die that night locked to his flesh, sucked down by the tar as they fed.

Ian Campbell heard Mammoth clearly as he lay there on the grass and stared into the dank pond, like ice varnished black except for the gaseous bubbles plopping on the surface in the moonlight. It was very dark despite the moon, and quiet, and the tar smell was everywhere. Ian heard how Mammoth sounded at the last: plaintive, yes, but defiant.

Somehow Ian knew that Mammoth would be defiant at the end. And Ian suddenly had the urge to jump to his feet and sound a call which he was sure somehow would drift across the ages to Mammoth who would sense what every piper knew--that there is no death.

Then to prove it he stood, adjusted the braces on his teeth to better taste the reed, and breathed deeply of the tarry chewy night air which could be blown into a tartan bag.

His silhouette there on the grassy knoll startled a little girl who was strolling with her father through Hancock Park along the path just north of Wilshire Boulevard. The child stopped and gasped as the silhouette took shape in the darkness. It had three horns which protruded from the side of it. It was tall, slender, erect, its head thrust back from a length of horn distended from its mouth. Then the sound came out of it--eerie, baffling--and she started to cry from fear. Her father picked her up and laughed reassuringly.

"It's a bagpipe, honey. It's just a boy playing a bagpipe."

Ian Campbell never heard her cry. He was preoccupied, struggling to get the reeds vibrating the right way. Sometimes they just wouldn't snap in there. In their own way the pipes were much harder than the piano. With no chords you just couldn't put harmony into them, and the timing and grace notes which embellished the melody notes meant everything. He took a deep breath, moistened the valve, and was careful to keep an imperceptible pressure on the bag with his elbow, hoping to keep the constant flow through the reeds. He blew and hoped, and on top of everything else the reeds began to chirp!

Ian tossed the three drones off his shoulder and began pacing disgustedly. For this he had pleaded with his mother to sell his piano. For this crazy instrument! Three hundred years ago Pepys heard one and said, "At the best it is mighty barbarous music." He was dead right, thought Ian.

The boy glanced at the tartan bag. It was a Campbell tartan, of course, for his clan. As always it stirred memories of the race, of fighting men with huge claymores, and the Campbells who sided with the English king against Bonnie Prince Charlie, and who slew the Macdonalds.

Then Ian discovered that he was unconsciously marching the twelve-foot square, caressing the ivory and ebony shaft, pressing ever so lightly on the tartan bag with his elbow. So he boldly threw the drones over his shoulder and without a moment's hesitation played "Mallorca."

It was good. The best he'd ever played it. And he tried "Major Norman Orr Ewing," the song which would earn him a medal in the novice class of the

coming Winter Games. He played and played and marched the twelve-foot square, lost in the music.

His mother did not allow him to play his pipes in the apartment. But what did it matter? Living across the street from Hancock Park and the tarpits was perfect for a piper. What better place to march than here on the turf out in the open, under the stars and lights off Wilshire Boulevard, with no sound but distant tire hum, smelling grass and ferns, and the tarry air so thick you could taste it. The seventeen year old solitary piper sucked the tar-laden air, and blew it through the blowpipe, his fingers striking alertly, and imagined the bag would somehow be better if magically cured by tarry fossilized air from another age.

Chrissie Campbell sat outside on the porch of the apartment waiting for Ian and enjoying the evening. In the distance someone was playing the radio loudly and from time to time she would catch bits of music, and later the laughter when the debris inevitably crashed from the swollen closet of Fibber McGee and Molly. Then the station was changed and the dialer stopped for a moment on a program of classical music and she tried to identify the piece being played by the violinist. She was reminded of her husband, Bill Campbell, the tall, curly haired doctor who had also played violin and was now dead five years. She sighed and wished for him. It was easy to wish and remember on nights like this, bright and balmy, when something like Indian summer comes to Southern California.

They had met at Manitoba Hospital where she worked as bookkeeper, she born in Saskatchewan, daughter of a railroader, her family even more Scottish than his Highlander people because hers were originally from the Hebrides and spoke Gaelic. It was natural that these two Scottish Canadians should meet there in the hospital and fall in love, and that in the hard times they should emigrate to America where things were said to be better.

They had good years in Valley City, North Dakota, the small college town where they lived almost on the bank of the Cheyenne River, on flat land near wheat fields and homestead trees.

The Depression was almost as hard on a doctor as it was on farmers and other town workers, but it was a very good life until after the war began, when the physician began to die from cancer.

He was in fact dead for the year he continued to draw breath. Many of their talks, their secret talks, were of death because he diagnosed his own illness and they had to prepare for it. The Depression and the illness drained them financially and there were long serious conversations riddled with merciful lies from her.

"You're not afraid are you, Chrissie?"

"No, Bill, I'm not."

"You're a strong capable woman, you needn't be afraid about making your own way."

"I'm not afraid. Bill. Really I'm not."

"The more we talk about California the better I like the idea."

"Yes, so do I, Bill."

"The war has made things boom out there. There's a great need for people. You're certainly not too old to find a good job."

"I'll raise a strong son, Bill. I swear it."

"You're not afraid, Chrissie?"

"I'm not, Bill. I'm not." And when she was alone with her thoughts during that year and for some time afterward, the fear would come. She never told him of the smothering fear which came always in the night and had to be defeated.

Chrissie believed she had some salvation in the inherited blood of dour and steely men. Her people were from the Isle of Lewis, the northernmost island

of the Hebrides, tempered by the icy Atlantic brine which blasted their faces for centuries. She had their strength and she knew it. More than that, she had their capacity to endure.

It was Chrissie Campbell's theory that she could give Ian culture and discipline, and that these were two great gifts, perhaps all she could ever really give. After Bill's death the discipline was essential for them both.