

JIM WANNAMAKER

DEATH'S WISHER

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There's just one way to disarm a bomb—be at least a step ahead of it—but what if it's always at least a step ahead of you?

Flinn took the seat that Wilmer indicated, dropped his overnight bag beside it, and tried to relax. He'd had five hours of inactivity on the plane, but the peremptory manner with which he had been routed out of his California apartment and conveyed to Washington, D. C., had so filled his mind with unanswered questions that he still found rest to be impossible. He had been told simply that the government needed him; and when federal wheels started turning, there wasn't much a private citizen could do to stop them.

He watched the tall, lean, dark-haired man, who had been introduced as Dr. Jackson Wilmer, nuclear physicist, disappear through a door.

Flinn looked around.

The room in which he sat—comparatively small, one of hundreds in the vastness of the Pentagon—seemed to be a sort of

minor office. At least there were several desks and filing cabinets. Besides himself, there were now only two other men in the room.

One, a complete stranger, sat at a desk across the room with his back turned toward Flinn.

The other leaned against the wall near the door. All Flinn knew about him, despite the fact that they had been as close as boy and dog for the past seven hours, was that his name was Hayes and that he was a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There was a muscular hardness about this young man that betrayed an athletic background. He was about thirty, had a craggy face beneath short brown hair, hard gray eyes, and his nose had been broken at least once. There was a light trace of beard beginning to show on the agent's face, but his brown summer suit still looked neat, and the man himself seemed something less than tired.

Looking at him, Flinn felt a sense of his own shabbiness. He needed a shave as badly as his slacks and sports jacket needed pressing.

At forty-two, Flinn was somewhat taller than average and slightly underweight from overwork and the irregularities of a bachelor existence. His black hair, beginning to recede a little, was peppered with silver, and his normally relaxed face was now tight, and the whites of his hazel eyes were bloodshot.

The door beside Hayes opened and Wilmer entered, carrying a brown folder. He was in his shirtsleeves, his necktie pulled down and his collar open, and, as he approached, Flinn noted that the

deeply tanned face of the physicist was as stubbled and tired-looking as his own felt. He was about the same age as Flinn.

Wilmer tossed the folder on the desk in front of Flinn and then perched on one corner of the desk. He gazed at the parapsychologist for a long few seconds, his eyes startlingly ice-blue in his dark face.

"Well," he said presently, "I guess you're wondering what this is all about."

"Yes, I guess I am," Flinn said wryly. "This bird dog—" he indicated Hayes with a nod of his head, and the agent retaliated with a flash of teeth—"hauls me away from an important experiment, loads me on an Air Force jet, and, after a high-altitude flight at God only knows what kind of fantastic speeds, I find myself in the holiest of holies, surrounded by MPs and—yes, you might say I'm wondering what this is all about."

Wilmer nodded patiently and rubbed one hand across his eyes.

"When you find out, you'll understand the reason for the secrecy." He faced Hayes. "How long have we been on this thing now, Fred? It seems like weeks."

"Ten days," the FBI man answered.

Wilmer shook his head slowly, then reached for the folder, opened it, and took out several scientific journals that Flinn recognized instantly. The physicist opened one of them.

"Advanced Experiments in TP, by Patrick Flinn," he read. He laid the publication aside and picked up another. "'A Monograph on the Probabilities of TH,' same author."

He quoted at random from the introductory page: "It is therefore my belief, based upon recent preliminary experimentation, that not only can one mind be used to scan the thoughts of another, but that ideas and suggestions may be implanted upon another's mind without the knowledge of the receptor. This is not to be confused with simple telepathic 'sending,' where the receptor is completely aware of the other's transmission. This to which I refer may, at least in one phase, be described as hypnotic in effect. The possibilities of such influence over the mind-matter of another are more than somewhat considerable...."

He paused, lowered the journal and gazed speculatively at Patrick Flinn. "Telepathy, telehypnosis," he said, rolling out the words as if they left a strange taste in his mouth. "Very interesting. Just how much truth is there in all this stuff? I mean, how far along are you, really?"

Flinn considered the question for a few seconds. It was one he had heard often, especially from his colleagues at the small California college where he held an assistantship in psychology. But after twenty years of skepticism—he had first discovered his rudimentary telepathic abilities just after graduating from college, and had been experimenting and advancing ever since—he had become immune to criticism.

"Very few people bother to read my articles," Flinn said evenly, "and still fewer understand them, and the *fewest* believe. But I can tell you I'm far enough along in my research to know

that the human mind has latent powers that are, to quote my article, more than somewhat considerable."

Wilmer and Hayes exchanged glances.

"That's fine," Wilmer said, "but abstruse, wouldn't you say? What I'm getting at is, I want to see a practical demonstration."

"Put up or shut up, eh?" Flinn said.

"I'd rather call it an examining of credentials," the physicist countered.

"All right. I don't see any connection between my work and nuclear physics, but what do you want me to do? First, though, I'd better explain that I might fail. I'm really just on the threshold."

"Granted. So I'll make it easy. Suppose—" He looked over his shoulder, faced Flinn again, and continued in a low voice: "Suppose you tell me what the man at the far desk is thinking."

Flinn glanced past the physicist at the stranger across the room. The man seemed completely unaware of the others. He was poring over some papers that were spread out upon the desk.

Flinn focused his eyes upon the man's head. His mind was really too steeped in fatigue for this sort of thing, but it was a chance not to be missed, a chance to demonstrate his talents in the presence of a responsible scientist, so he willed himself into a gradually deepening concentration. His eyes seemed to go myopic, out of focus. A gray, ethereal haze came into his consciousness, like swirling smoke. *Easy?* But presently a picture began to form, blurred at first, then fragmentary, then coming into identifiable clarity.

Flinn held it for a moment, before snapping back into objective consciousness. He was grinning slightly as his eyes refocused and came to rest on Wilmer.

"Well?" the physicist asked.

"What's his name?" Flinn said.

"Barnes. Robert Barnes."

"Say, Bob!" Flinn called out. The smallish, partially bald man at the far desk looked up and swiveled around to face him. "Tell me something, Bob," Flinn went on. "Do you act that way with all women, or just blondes?"

Barnes' placid face suddenly underwent a marvelous transformation. First he blushed furiously. Then his jaw dropped open and the high color began to drain away. He stared across the room, his face pallid.

"My God!" he managed to blurt in a stricken voice.

There was dead silence in the room as Wilmer and Hayes looked from Barnes' shocked face to Flinn's smiling one.

"I think it's obvious—" Hayes started to say.

"Me, too," Wilmer agreed. He looked sharply at Flinn. "Can you tell what I'm thinking at this moment?"

Flinn shrugged. "Not without a special effort, and I'm not going to make that effort unless I have to."

The physicist sighed and his tanned face relaxed a little. He looked at Flinn with a new respect. "I guess I'd better put you in the picture." He reopened the folder and extracted several newspaper clippings. "What I'm about to divulge is so

unbelievable that—well, I'd best break it to you gradually. You know my job. That fact and this tan—" he pointed to his face—"should give you an inkling of what I've been up to the last few weeks."

Flinn thought, and nodded. "I'm to assume that you've been out in the Pacific, is that right?"

"Yes," Wilmer said. "Eniwetok. Have you been following our progress in the papers?"

"Not really. I've been a little too busy, I'm afraid."

"No matter." The physicist handed the clippings to Flinn. "Read these."

Flinn scanned the first clipping. It bore a recent date.

"... Reliable sources," he read aloud, "report that a civilian, believed to be a scientist, is being held incommunicado in the Pentagon. All efforts on the part of newsmen to gain additional information have been met with polite but firm rebuffs. Spokesmen from the AEC have refused to confirm or deny theories that the man's detention is in some way connected with the recent fiasco at Eniwetok Atoll ..."

He read the second. It was date-lined Honolulu, a week before the other.

"Beyond the terse comment that there were "no casualties," all official sources are silent today concerning the news leak of the failure of a nuclear device in our Pacific Test Area. It has been understood that this device, the third in a series of thermonuclear test shots, failed to detonate. Since this test was

scheduled to have been a "tower shot," under rigid instrumental control, much speculation has arisen ..."

Flinn looked up hopelessly. "I don't understand. Does this concern you? I mean—"

"It concerns *all* of us," Wilmer said grimly. "But I know what you're getting at. No, I'm not the man they mention. I was in charge of that particular test."

Hayes cleared his throat abruptly and Wilmer nodded.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Flinn, before we go any further, that everything you hear and see, and have heard and seen from the time Fred first contacted you, is to be held in the strictest confidence. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"All right. How much do you know about atomic physics?"

Flinn spread his hands. "I'm somewhat past the Democritus stage, but I don't claim to be an expert."

"Well, basically, in a thermonuclear explosive device, hydrogen is transformed into helium," said Hayes. "In the process there is a loss of mass. This loss results in a tremendous and sudden release of energy. Are you familiar with the energy-mass relationship, $E = MC^2$?"

Flinn nodded.

"Okay. In other words, the nuclei of hydrogen atoms are fused under the influence of great heat, resulting in a different element, less mass, a release of energy, and an explosion."

"I'm with you so far," Flinn said.

"Then you realize that once this fusion process commences, nothing in God's great universe can stop it?"

"Yes."

"And that after certain things are done, fusion *must* result?"

"Surely."

"Well, so all of us believed, too. But we were wrong about it."

"I don't understand. You just said—"

"So I *said*. But let me try to describe to you the situation as it happened." He paused, not for dramatic effect, but to take a moment to force himself to recall what Flinn could see must have been a very painful experience.

"We are on the command ship," Wilmer continued, "at a safe distance from the atoll. Everything is in readiness, checked and double-checked by me, personally. The automatic firing process is in progress. The last countdown has commenced. Five, four, three, two, one, zero. *Nothing happens.*

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