



Winter Moon

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DEDICATION

ALSO BY DEAN KOONTZ

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EXCERPT FROM ODD APOCALYPSE

PART ONE



The City of the Dying Day

Beaches, surfers, California girls.
Wind scented with fabulous dreams.
Bougainvillea, groves of oranges.
Stars are born, everything gleams.

A weather change. Shadows fall.
New scent upon the wind—decay.
Cocaine, Uzis, drive-by shootings.
Death is a banker. Everyone pays.

—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

CHAPTER ONE

Death was driving an emerald-green Lexus. It pulled off the street, passed the four self-service pumps, and stopped in one of the two full-service lanes.

Standing in front of the station, Jack McGarvey noticed the car but not the driver. Even under a bruised and swollen sky that hid the sun, the Lexus gleamed like a jewel, a sleek and lustrous machine. The windows were darkly tinted, so he couldn't have seen the driver clearly even if he had tried.

As a thirty-two-year-old cop with a wife, a child, and a big mortgage, Jack had no prospects of buying an expensive luxury car, but he didn't envy the owner of the Lexus. He often remembered his dad's admonition that envy was mental theft. If you coveted another man's possessions, Dad said, then you should be willing to take on his responsibilities, heartaches, and troubles along with his money.

He stared at the car for a moment, admiring it as he might a priceless painting at the Getty Museum or a first edition of a James M. Cain novel in a pristine dust jacket—with no strong desire to possess it, taking pleasure merely from the fact of its existence.

In a society that often seemed to be spinning toward anarchy, where ugliness and decay made new inroads every day, his spirits were lifted by any proof that the hands of men and women were capable of producing things of beauty and quality. The Lexus, of course, was an import, designed and manufactured on foreign shores; however, it was the entire human species that seemed damned, not just his countrymen, and evidence of standards and dedication was heartening regardless of where he found it.

An attendant in a gray uniform hurried out of the office and approached the gleaming car, and Jack gave his full attention, once more, to Hassam Arkadian.

“My station is an island of cleanliness in a filthy sea, an eye of sanity in a storm of madness,” Arkadian said, speaking earnestly, unaware of sounding melodramatic.

He was slender, about forty, with dark hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. The creases in the legs of his gray cotton work pants were knife-sharp, and his matching work shirt and jacket were immaculate.

“I had the aluminum siding and the brick treated with a new sealant,” he said, indicating the facade of the service station with a sweep of his arm. “Paint won't stick to it. Not even metallic paint. Wasn't cheap. But now when these gang kids or crazy-stupid taggers come around at night and spray their

trash all over the walls, we scrub it off, scrub it right off the next morning.”

With his meticulous grooming, singular intensity, and quick slender hands, Arkadian might have been a surgeon about to begin his workday in an operating theater. He was, instead, the owner-operator of the service station.

“Do you know,” he said incredulously, “there are professors who have written books on the value of graffiti? The *value* of graffiti? The *value*?”

“They call it street art,” said Luther Bryson, Jack’s partner.

Arkadian gazed up disbelievingly at the towering black cop. “You think what these punks do is *art*?”

“Hey, no, not me,” Luther said.

At six three and two hundred ten pounds, he was three inches taller than Jack and forty pounds heavier, with maybe eight inches and seventy pounds on Arkadian. Though he was a good partner and a good man, his granite face seemed incapable of the flexibility required for a smile. His deeply set eyes were unwaveringly forthright. My Malcolm X glare, he called it. With or without his uniform, Luther Bryson could intimidate anyone from the Pope to a purse snatcher.

He wasn’t using the glare now, wasn’t trying to intimidate Arkadian, was in complete agreement with him. “Not me. I’m just saying that’s what the candy-ass crowd calls it. Street art.”

The service-station owner said, “These are *professors*. Educated men and women. Doctors of art and literature. They have the benefit of an education my parents couldn’t afford to give me, but they’re *stupid*. There’s no other word for it. Stupid, stupid, stupid.” His expressive face revealed the frustration and anger that Jack encountered with increasing frequency in the City of Angels. “What *fools* do universities produce these days?”

Arkadian had labored to make his operation special. Bracketing the property were wedge-shaped brick planters in which grew queen palms, azaleas laden with clusters of red flowers, and impatiens in pinks and purples. There was no grime, no litter. The portico covering the pumps was supported by brick columns, and the whole station had a quaint colonial appearance.

In any age, the station would have seemed misplaced in Los Angeles. Freshly painted and clean, it was doubly out of place in the grunge that had been spreading like a malignancy through the city during the nineties.

“Come on, come look, look,” Arkadian said, and headed toward the south end of the building.

“Poor guy’s gonna blow out an artery in the brain over this,” Luther said.

“Somebody should tell him it’s not fashionable to give a damn these days,” Jack said.

A low and menacing rumble of thunder rolled through the distended sky.

Looking at the dark clouds, Luther said, “Weatherman predicted it wouldn’t rain today.”

“Maybe it wasn’t thunder. Maybe somebody finally blew up city hall.”

“You think? Well, if the place was full of politicians,” Luther said, “we should take the rest of the day off, find a bar, do some celebrating.”

“Come on, officers,” Arkadian called to them. He had reached the south corner of the building, near where they had parked their patrol car. “Look at this, I want you to see this, I want you to see my bathrooms.”

“His bathrooms?” Luther said.

Jack laughed. “Hell, you got anything better to do?”

“A lot safer than chasing bad guys,” Luther said, following Arkadian.

Jack glanced at the Lexus again. Nice machine. Zero to sixty in how many seconds? Eight? Seven? Must handle like a dream.

The driver had gotten out of the car and was standing beside it. Jack noticed little about the guy, only that he was wearing a loose-fitting, double-breasted Armani suit.

The Lexus, on the other hand, had wire wheels and chrome guards around the wheel wells. Reflections of storm clouds moved slowly across its windshield and made mysterious smoky patterns in the depths of its jewel-green finish.

Sighing, Jack followed Luther past the two open bays of the repair garage. The first stall was empty but a gray BMW was on the hydraulic lift in the second space. A young Asian man in mechanic’s coveralls was at work on the car. Tools and supplies were neatly racked along the walls, floor to ceiling, and the two bays looked cleaner than the average kitchen in a four-star restaurant.

At the corner of the building stood a pair of soft-drink vending machines. They purred and clinked as if formulating and bottling the beverages within their own guts.

Around the corner were the men’s and women’s rest rooms, where Arkadian had opened both doors. “Take a look, go ahead—I want you to see my bathrooms.”

Both small rooms had white ceramic-tile floors and walls, white commodes, white swing-top wastebaskets, white sinks, gleaming chrome fixtures, and large mirrors above the sinks.

“Spotless,” Arkadian said, talking fast, running his sentences together in his quiet anger. “No streaks on the mirrors, no stains in the sinks, we check them after every customer uses them, disinfect them every day, you could *eat* off those floors and it would be as safe as eating off the plates from your own mother’s kitchen.”

Looking at Jack over Arkadian’s head, Luther smiled and said, “I think I’ll have a steak and baked

potato. What about you?"

"Just a salad," Jack said. "I'm trying to lose a few pounds."

Even if he had been listening to them, Mr. Arkadian couldn't have been joked out of his bleak mood. He jangled a ring of keys.

"I keep them locked, give the keys only to customers. City inspector stops around, he tells me a new rule says these are public facilities, so you've got to let them open for the public, whether they buy anything at your place or not."

He jangled the keys again, harder, more angrily, then harder still. Neither Jack nor Luther tried to comment above the strident ring and rattle.

"Let them fine me. I'll pay the fine. When these are unlocked, the drunks and junkie bums who live in alleys and parks, they use my bathrooms, urinate on the floor, vomit in the sinks. You wouldn't *believe* the mess they make, disgusting, things I'd be embarrassed to talk about."

Arkadian was actually blushing at the thought of what he could have told them. He waved the jangling keys in the air in front of each open door, and he reminded Jack of nothing so much as a voodoo priest casting a spell—in this case, to ward off the riffraff who would despoil his rest rooms. His face was as mottled and turbulent as the stormy sky.

"Let me tell you something. Hassam Arkadian works sixty and seventy hours a week, Hassam Arkadian employs eight people full time, and Hassam Arkadian pays half of what he earns in taxes, but Hassam Arkadian is *not* going to spend his life cleaning up vomit because a bunch of stupid bureaucrats have more compassion for some lazy-drunken-psycho-junkie bums than they have for people who are trying their damndest to lead decent lives."

He finished his speech in a rush, breathless. Stopped jangling the keys. Sighed. He closed the doors and locked them.

Jack felt useless. He could see that Luther was uncomfortable too. Sometimes a cop couldn't do much more for a victim than nod in sympathy and shake his head in sorry amazement at the depths into which the city was sinking. That was one of the worst things about the job.

Mr. Arkadian went around the corner to the front of the station again. He wasn't walking as fast as before. His shoulders were slumped, and for the first time he looked more dejected than angry, as if he had decided, perhaps on a subconscious level, to give up the fight.

Jack hoped that wasn't the case. In his daily life, Hassam was struggling to realize a dream of a better future, a better world. He was one of a dwindling number who still had enough guts to resist entropy. Civilization's soldiers, warring on the side of hope, were already too few to make a satisfactory army.

Adjusting their gun belts, Jack and Luther followed Arkadian past the soft-drink dispensers.

The man in the Armani suit was standing at the second vending machine, studying the selections. He was about Jack's age, tall, blond, clean-shaven, with a golden-bronze complexion that could have been gotten locally at that time of year only from a tanning bed. As they walked by him, he pulled a handful of change from one pocket of his baggy trousers and picked through the coins.

Out at the pumps, the attendant was washing the windshield of the Lexus, though it had looked freshly washed when the car first pulled in from the street.

Arkadian stopped at the plate-glass window that occupied half the front wall of the station office. "Street art," he said softly, sadly, as Jack and Luther joined him. "Only a fool would call it anything but vandalism. Barbarians are loose."

Lately, some vandals had traded spray cans for stencils and acid paste. They etched their symbols and slogans on the glass of parked cars and the windows of businesses that were unprotected by security shutters at night.

Arkadian's front window was permanently marred by half a dozen different personal marks made by members of the same gang, some of them repeated two and three times. In four-inch-high letters, they had also etched the words *THE BLOODBATH IS COMING*.

These antisocial acts often reminded Jack of an event in Nazi Germany about which he'd once read. Before the war had even begun, psychopathic thugs had roamed the streets during one long night, *Kristallnacht*, defacing walls with hateful words, smashing windows of homes and stores owned by Jews until the streets glittered as if paved with crystal. Sometimes it seemed to him that the barbarians to which Arkadian referred were the new fascists, from both ends of the political spectrum this time, hating not just Jews but anyone with a stake in social order and civility. Their vandalism was a slow-motion *Kristallnacht*, conducted over years instead of hours.

"It's worse on the next window," Arkadian said, leading them around the corner to the north side of the station.

That wall of the office featured another large sheet of glass, on which, in addition to gang symbols, etched block letters proclaimed *ARMENIAN SHITHEAD*.

Even the sight of the racial slur couldn't rekindle Hassam Arkadian's anger. He stared sad-eyed at the offensive words and said, "I've always tried to treat people well. I'm not perfect, not without sin. Who is? But I've done my best to be a good man, fair, honest—and now this."

"Won't make you feel any better," Luther said, "but if it was up to me, the law would let us take the creeps who do this and stencil that second word right above their eyes. Shithead. Etch it into their skin with acid just like they did to your glass. Make 'em walk around like that for a couple of years and see how their attitude improves before maybe we give them some plastic surgery."

"You think you can find who did it?" Arkadian asked, though he surely knew the answer.

Luther shook his head, and Jack said, "Not a chance. We'll file a report, of course, but there's no manpower to work on small crime like this. Best thing you can do is install roll-down metal shutters

the same day you replace the windows, so they're covered at night."

"Otherwise, you'll be putting in new glass every week," Luther said, "and pretty soon your insurance company will drop you."

"They already dropped my vandalism coverage after one claim," Hassam Arkadian said. "About the only thing they'll cover me for now is earthquake, flood, and fire. Not even fire if it happens in a riot."

They stood in silence, staring at the window, brooding about their powerlessness.

A cool March wind sprang up. In the nearby planter, the queen palms rustled, and soft creaking noises arose from where the stems of the big fronds joined the trunks.

"Well," Jack said at last, "it could be worse, Mr. Arkadian. I mean, at least you're in a pretty good part of the city here on the West Side."

"Yeah, and doesn't it break your heart," Arkadian said, "this is a *good* neighborhood?"

Jack didn't even want to think about that.

Luther started to speak but was interrupted by a loud crash and a shout of anger from the front of the station. As the three of them hurried around the corner, a violent gust of wind made the plate-glass windows thrum.

Fifty feet away, the man in the Armani suit kicked the vending machine again. A foaming can of Pepsi lay behind him, contents spreading across the blacktop.

"Poison," he shouted at the machine, "poison, damn it, damn you, damn you, poison!"

Arkadian rushed toward the customer. "Sir, please, I'm sorry, if the machine gave you the wrong selection—"

"Hey, wait right there," Luther said, speaking as much to the station owner as to the infuriated stranger.

In front of the office door, Jack caught up with Arkadian, put a hand on his shoulder, stopped him, and said, "Better let us handle this."

"Damn poison," the customer said furiously, and he made a fist as if he wanted to punch the vending machine.

"It's just the machine," Arkadian told Jack and Luther. "They keep *saying* it's fixed, but it keeps giving you Pepsi when you push Orange Crush."

As bad as things were in the City of Angels these days, Jack found it difficult to believe that Arkadian was accustomed to seeing people fly off the handle every time an unwanted can of Pepsi dropped into the dispensing tray.

The customer turned away from the machine and from them, as if he might walk off and leave his Lexus. He seemed to be shaking with anger, but it was mostly the blustery wind shivering the loosely fitted suit.

“What’s wrong here?” Luther asked, heading toward the guy as thunder tolled across the lowering sky and the palms in the south planter thrashed against a backdrop of black clouds.

Jack started to follow Luther before he saw the suit jacket billow out behind the blond, flapping like bat wings. Except the coat had been buttoned a moment ago. Double-breasted, buttoned twice.

The angry man faced away from them still, shoulders hunched, head lowered. Because of the loose and billowing fabric of his suit, he seemed less than human, like a hunchbacked troll. The guy began to turn, and Jack would not have been surprised to see the deformed muzzle of a beast, but it was the same tan and clean-shaven face as before.

Why had the son of a bitch unbuttoned the coat unless there was something under it that he needed and what might an irrational and angry man need that he kept under his jacket, his loose-fitting suit jacket, his roomy goddamned jacket?

Jack called a warning to Luther.

But Luther sensed trouble too. His right hand moved toward the gun holstered on his hip.

The perp had the advantage because he was the initiator. No one knew violence was at hand until he unleashed it, so he swung all the way around to face them, holding a weapon in both hands, before Luther and Jack had even touched their revolvers.

Automatic gunfire hammered the day. Bullets pounded Luther’s chest, knocked the big man off his feet, hurled him backward, and Hassam Arkadian spun from the impact of one-two-three hits, went down hard, screaming in agony.

Jack threw himself against the glass door to the office. He almost made it to cover before taking a hit to the left leg. He felt as if he’d been clubbed across the thigh with a tire iron, but it was a bullet, not a blow.

He dropped facedown on the office floor. The door swung shut behind him, gunfire shattered it, and gummy chunks of tempered glass cascaded across his back.

Hot pain boiled sweat from him.

A radio was playing. Golden oldies. Dionne Warwick. Singing about the world needing love, sweet love.

Outside, Arkadian was still screaming, but there wasn’t a sound from Luther Bryson.

Luther was dead. Jack couldn’t think about that. Dead. Didn’t dare think about it. Dead. *Wouldn’t* think about it.

The chatter of more gunfire.

Someone else screamed. Probably the attendant at the Lexus. It wasn't a lasting scream. Brief, quickly choked off.

Outside, Arkadian wasn't screaming anymore, either. He was sobbing and calling for Jesus.

Hard, chill wind made the plate-glass windows vibrate. It hooted through the shattered door.

The gunman would be coming.

CHAPTER TWO

Jack was stunned at the quantity of his own blood on the vinyl-tile floor around him. Nausea squirmed through him, and greasy sweat streamed down his face. He couldn't take his eyes off the spreading stain that darkened his pants.

He had never been shot before. The pain was terrible but not as bad as he would have expected. Worse than the pain was the sense of violation and vulnerability, a terrible frantic awareness of the true fragility of the human body.

He might not be able to hold on to consciousness for long. A hungry darkness was already eating away at the edges of his vision.

He probably couldn't put much weight on his left leg, and he didn't have time to pull himself up on his right alone, not while in such an exposed position. Shedding broken glass as a bright-scaled snake might shed an old skin, unavoidably leaving a trail of blood, he crawled fast on his belly alongside the L-shaped work counter behind which Arkadian kept the cash register.

The gunman would be coming.

From the sound the weapon made and the brief glimpse he'd gotten of it, Jack figured it was a submachine gun—maybe a Micro Uzi. The Micro was less than ten inches long with the wire stock folded forward but a lot heavier than a pistol, weighing about two kilos if it had a single magazine, heavier if it featured two magazines welded at right angles to give it a forty-round capacity. It would be like carrying a standard-size bag of sugar in a sling; it was sure to cause chronic neck pain, but not too big to fit an oversize shoulder holster under an Armani suit—and worth the trouble if a man had snake-mean enemies. Could be an FN P90, too, or maybe a British Bushman 2, but probably not a Czech Skorpion, because a Skorpion fired only .32 ACP ammo. Judging by how hard Luther had gone down, this seemed to be a gun with more punch than a Skorpion, which the 9mm Micro Uzi provided. Forty rounds in the Uzi to start, and the son of a bitch had fired twelve, sixteen at most, so at least twenty-four rounds were left, and maybe a pocketful of spare cartridges.

Thunder boomed, the air felt heavy with pent-up rain, wind shrieked through the ruined door, and the gun rattled again. Outside, Hassam Arkadian's cries to Jesus abruptly ended.

Jack desperately pulled himself around the end of the counter, thinking the unthinkable. Luther Bryson dead. Arkadian dead. The attendant dead. Most likely the young Asian mechanic too. All of them wasted. The world had been turned upside down in less than a minute.

Now it was one-on-one, survival of the fittest, and Jack wasn't afraid of that game. Though Darwinian selection tended to favor the guy with the biggest gun and best supply of ammunition, cleverness could outweigh caliber. He had been saved by his wits before and might be again.

Surviving could be easier when he had his back to the wall, the odds were stacked high against him and he had no one to worry about but himself. With only his own sorry ass on the line, he was more focused, free to risk inaction or recklessness, free to be a coward or a kamikaze fool, whatever the occasion demanded.

Then he dragged himself entirely into the sheltered space behind the counter and discovered that he didn't, after all, enjoy the freedom of a sole survivor. A woman was huddled there: petite, long dark hair, attractive. Gray shirt, work pants, white socks, black shoes with thick rubber soles. She was in her mid-thirties, maybe five or six years younger than Hassam Arkadian. Could be his wife. No, not a wife any more. Widow. She was sitting on the floor, knees drawn up against her chest, arms wrapped tightly around her legs, trying to make herself as small as possible, straining for invisibility.

Her presence changed everything for Jack, put him on the line and reduced his own chances of survival. He couldn't choose to hide, couldn't even opt for recklessness any longer. He had to think hard and clearly, determine the best course of action, and do the right thing. He was responsible for her. He had sworn an oath to serve and protect the public, and he was old-fashioned enough to take oaths seriously.

The woman's eyes were wide with terror and shimmering with unspilled tears. Even in the midst of fear for her own life, she seemed to comprehend the meaning of Arkadian's sudden lapse into silence.

Jack drew his revolver.

Serve and protect.

He was shivering uncontrollably. His left leg was hot, but the rest of him was freezing, as if all his body heat was draining out through the wound.

Outside, a sustained rattle of automatic-weapon fire ended in an explosion that rocked the service station, tipped over a candy-vending machine in the office, and blew in both big windows on which the gang symbols had been etched. The huddled woman covered her face with her hands, Jack squeezed his eyes shut, and glass spilled over the counter into the space where they had taken shelter.

When he opened his eyes, endless phalanxes of shadows and light charged across the office. The wind coming through the shattered door was no longer chilly but hot, and the phantasms swarming over the walls were reflections of fire. The maniac with the Uzi had shot up one or more of the gasoline pumps.

Cautiously Jack pulled himself up against the counter, putting no weight on his left leg. Though his misery still seemed inadequate to the wound, he figured it would get worse suddenly and soon. He didn't want to precipitate it by any action of his own for fear that a sufficiently fierce flash of pain would make him pass out.

Under considerable pressure, jets of burning gasoline were squirting from one of the riddled pumps splashing like molten lava onto the blacktop. The pavement sloped toward the busy street, and scintillant rivers of fire spread in that direction.

The explosion had ignited the roof of the portico that sheltered the pumps. Flames licked rapidly toward the main building.

The Lexus was on fire. The lunatic bastard had destroyed his own car, which in some strange way made him seem more completely out of control and dangerous than anything else he'd done.

Amid the inferno, which became more panoramic by the second as the gasoline streamed across the blacktop, the killer was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he'd regained at least some of his senses and fled on foot.

More likely, he was in the two-bay garage, coming at them by that route rather than making a bold approach through the shattered front entrance. Less than fifteen feet from Jack, a painted metal door connected the garage to the office. It was closed.

Leaning against the counter, he gripped his revolver in both hands and aimed at the door, arms extended rigidly in front of him, ready to blow the perp to hell at the first opportunity. His hands were shaking. So cold. He strained to hold the gun steady, which helped, but he couldn't entirely repress the tremors.

The darkness at the edges of his vision had retreated. Now it began to encroach again. He blinked furiously, trying to wash away the frightening peripheral blindness as he might have tried to expel a speck of dust, but to no avail.

The air smelled of gasoline and hot tar. Shifting wind blew smoke into the room—not much, just enough to make him want to cough. He clenched his teeth, making only a low choking sound in his throat, because the killer might be on the far side of the door, hesitating and listening.

Still directing the revolver squarely at the entrance from the garage, he glanced outside into whirlwinds of tempestuous fire and churning shrouds of black smoke, afraid he was wrong. The gunman might erupt, after all, from that conflagration, like a demon out of perdition.

The metal door again. Painted the palest blue. Like deep clear water seen through a layer of crystalline ice.

The color made him cold. Everything made him cold—the hollow iron-hard *thunk-thunk* of his laboring heart, the whisper-soft weeping of the woman huddled on the floor behind him, the glittering debris of broken glass. Even the roar and crackle of the fire chilled him.

Outside, seething flames had traveled the length of the portico and reached the front of the service station. The roof must be ablaze by now.

The pale-blue door.

Open it, you crazy sonofabitch. Come on, come on, come on.

Another explosion.

He had to turn his head completely away from the door to the garage and look directly at the front of the station to see what had happened, because he had lost nearly all of his peripheral vision.

The fuel tank of the Lexus. The vehicle was engulfed, reduced to just the black skeleton of a car wrapped by greedy tongues of fire that stripped it of its lustrous emerald paint, fine leather upholstery, and other plush appointments.

The blue door remained closed.

The revolver seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. His arms ached. He couldn't hold the weapon steady. Could barely hold it at all.

He wanted to lie down and close his eyes. Sleep a little. Dream a little dream: green pastures, wildflowers, a blue sky, the city long forgotten.

When he looked down at his leg, he discovered he was standing in a pool of blood. An artery must have been nicked, maybe torn, and he was going fast, dizzy just from looking down, nausea swelling anew, a trembling in his gut.

Fire on the roof. He could hear it overhead, distinctly different from the crackle and roar of the blaze in front of the station, shingles popping, rafters creaking as construction joints were tortured by the fierce, dry heat. They might have only seconds before the ceiling exploded into flames or caved in on them.

He didn't understand how he could be getting colder by the moment when fire was all around them. The sweat streaming down his face was like ice water.

Even if the roof didn't cave in for a couple of minutes, he might be dead or too weak to pull the trigger when at last the killer rushed them. He couldn't wait any longer.

He had to give up the two-hand grip on the gun. He needed his left hand to brace himself against the Formica top of the counter as he circled the end of it, keeping all weight off his left leg.

But when he reached the end of the counter, he was too dizzy to hop the ten or twelve feet to the blue door. He had to use the toe of his left foot as a balance point, applying the minimum pressure required to stay erect as he hitched across the office.

Surprisingly, the pain was bearable. Then he realized it was tolerable only because his leg was going numb. A cool tingle coursed through the limb from hip to ankle. Even the wound itself was no longer hot, not even warm.

The door. His left hand on the knob looked so far away, as if he were peering at it through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.

Revolver in the right hand. Hanging down at his side. Like a massive dumbbell. The effort required to raise the weapon caused his stomach to keel over on itself repeatedly.

The killer might be waiting on the other side, watching the knob, so Jack pushed the door open and went through it fast, the revolver thrust out in front of him. He stumbled, almost fell, and stepped past the door, swinging the gun right and left, heart pounding so hard it jolted his weakening arms, but there was no target. He could see all the way across the garage because the BMW was up on the service rack. The only person in sight was the Asian mechanic, as dead as the concrete on which he was sprawled.

Jack turned to the blue door. It was black on this side, which seemed ominous, glossy black, and it had gone shut behind him.

He took a step toward it, meaning to pull it open. He fell against it instead.

Harried by the changeable wind, a tide of bitter tarry smoke washed into the double-bay garage.

Coughing, Jack wrenched open the door. The office was filled with smoke, an antechamber to hell.

He shouted for the woman to come to him, and he was dismayed to hear that his shout was barely more than a thin wheeze.

She was already on the move, however, and before he could try to shout again, she appeared out of the roiling smoke, with one hand clamped over her nose and mouth.

At first, when she leaned against him, Jack thought she was seeking support, strength he didn't have to give, but he realized she was urging *him* to rely on *her*. He was the one who had taken the oath, who had sworn to serve and defend. He felt dismally inadequate because he couldn't scoop her up in his arms and carry her out of there as a hero might have done in a movie.

He leaned on the woman as little as he dared and turned left with her in the direction of the open bay door, which was obscured by the smoke. He dragged his left leg. No longer any feeling in it whatsoever, no pain, not even a tingle. Dead weight. Eyes squeezed shut against the stinging smoke, bursts of color coruscating across the backs of his eyelids. Holding his breath, resisting a powerful urge to vomit. Somebody screaming, a shrill and terrible scream, on and on. No, not a scream. Sirens. Rapidly drawing closer. Then he and the woman were in the open, which he detected by a change in the wind, and he gasped for breath, which came cold and clean into his lungs.

When he opened his eyes, the world was blurred by tears that the abrasive smoke had rubbed from him, and he blinked frantically until his sight cleared somewhat. Because of blood loss or shock, he was reduced to tunnel vision. It was like looking at the world through twin gun barrels, because the surrounding darkness was as smooth as the curve of a steel bore.

To his left, everything was enveloped in flames. The Lexus. Portico. Service station. Arkadian's body was on fire. Luther's was not afire yet, but hot embers were falling on it, flaming bits of shingle and wood, and at any moment his uniform would ignite. Burning gasoline still arced from the riddled pumps and streamed toward the street. The blacktop along the perimeter of the blaze was melting,

boiling. Churning masses of thick black smoke rose high above the city, blending into the pendulous black and gray storm clouds.

Someone cursed.

Jack jerked his head to the right, away from the terrible but hypnotically fascinating inferno, and focused his narrowed field of vision on the soft-drink machines at the corner of the station. The killer was standing there, as if oblivious of the destruction he had wrought, feeding coins into the first of the two vending machines.

Two more discarded cans of Pepsi lay on the asphalt behind him. The Micro Uzi was in his left hand, at his side, muzzle pointing at the pavement. He slammed the flat of his fist against one of the buttons on the selection board.

Feebly shoving the woman away, Jack whispered, "*Get down!*"

He turned clumsily toward the killer, swaying, barely able to remain on his feet.

The can of soda clattered into the delivery tray. The gunman leaned forward, squinting, then cursed again.

Shuddering violently, Jack struggled to raise his revolver. It seemed to be shackled to the ground on a short length of chain, requiring him to lift the entire world in order to bring the weapon high enough to aim.

Aware of him, responding with an arrogant leisureliness, the psychopath in the expensive suit turned and advanced a couple of steps, bringing up his own weapon.

Jack squeezed off a shot. He was so weak, the recoil knocked him backward and off his feet.

The killer loosed a burst of six or eight rounds.

Jack was already falling out of the line of fire. As bullets cut the air over his head, he fired another shot, and then a third as he crumpled onto the blacktop.

Incredibly, the third round slammed the killer in the chest and pitched him backward into the vending machine. He bounced off the machine and dropped onto his knees. He was badly hurt, perhaps mortally wounded, his white silk shirt turning red as swiftly as a trick scarf transformed by a magician's deft hands, but he wasn't dead yet, and he still had the Micro Uzi.

The sirens were extremely loud. Help was nearly at hand, but it was probably going to come too late.

A blast of thunder breached a dam in the sky, and torrents of icy rain suddenly fell by the megaton.

With an effort that nearly caused him to black out, Jack sat up and clasped his revolver in both hands. He squeezed off a shot that was wide of the mark. The recoil induced a muscle spasm in his

arms. All the strength went out of his hands, and he lost his grip on the revolver, which clattered onto the blacktop between his spread legs.

The killer loosed two-three-four shots, and Jack took two hits in the chest. He was knocked flat. The back of his skull bounced painfully off the pavement.

He tried to sit up again. He could only raise his head, and not far, just far enough to see that the killer had gone down after squeezing off that last barrage, facedown on the blacktop. The round in the chest had taken him out, though not fast enough.

Jack's head lolled to his left. Even as his tunnel vision constricted further, he saw a black-and-white swing off the street, into the station at high speed, fishtailing to a stop as the driver stood on the brakes.

Jack's vision closed down altogether. He was totally blind.

He felt as helpless as a baby, and he began to cry.

He heard doors opening, officers shouting.

It was over.

Luther was dead. Almost one year since Tommy Fernandez had been shot down beside him. Tommy, then Luther. Two good partners, good friends, in one year. But it was over.

Voices. Sirens. A crash that might have been the portico collapsing over the service-station pumps.

Sounds were increasingly muffled, as if someone was steadily packing his ears full of cotton. His hearing was fading in much the same way that his vision had gone.

Other senses too. He repeatedly pursed his dry mouth, trying unsuccessfully to work up some saliva and get a taste of something, even the acrid fumes of gasoline and burning tar. He couldn't smell anything, either, although a moment ago the air had been ripe with foul odors.

Couldn't feel the pavement under him. Or the blustery wind. No pain any more. Not even a tingle. Just cold. Deep, penetrating cold.

Utter deafness overcame him.

Holding desperately to the spark of life in a body that had become an insensate receptacle for his mind, he wondered if he would ever see Heather and Toby again. When he tried to summon their faces from memory, he could not recall what they looked like, his wife and son, two people he loved more than life itself, couldn't remember their eyes or the color of their hair, which scared him, *terrified* him. He knew he was shaking with grief, as if *they* had died, but he couldn't feel the shakes, knew he was crying but couldn't feel the tears, strained harder to bring their precious faces to mind, Toby and Heather, Heather and Toby, but his imagination was as blind as his eyes. His interior world wasn't a bottomless pit of darkness but a blank wintry whiteness, like a vision of driving snow, a blizzard,

frigid, glacial, arctic, unrelenting.

CHAPTER THREE

Lightning flashed, followed by a crash of thunder so powerful it rattled the kitchen windows. The storm began not with a sprinkle or drizzle but with a sudden downpour, as if clouds were hollow structures that could shatter like eggshells and spill their entire contents at once.

Heather was standing at the counter beside the refrigerator, scooping orange sherbet out of a carton into a bowl, and she turned to look at the window above the sink. Rain was falling so hard it almost appeared to be snow, a white deluge. The branches of the ficus benjamina in the backyard drooped under the weight of that vertical river, their longest trailers touching the ground.

She was relieved she wouldn't be on the freeways later in the day, commuting home from work. Due to a lack of regular experience, Californians weren't good at driving in rain; they either slowed to a crawl and took such extreme precautions that they halted traffic, or they proceeded in their usual gonzo fashion and careened into one another with a recklessness approaching enthusiasm. Later, a lot of people would find their usual hour-long evening commute stretching into a two-and-a-half-hour ordeal.

There was, after all, a bright side to being unemployed. She just hadn't been looking hard enough for it. No doubt, if she put her mind to it, she'd think of a long list of other benefits. Like not having to buy any new clothes for work. Look how much she had saved right there. Didn't have to worry about the stability of the bank in which they had their savings account, either, because at the rate they were going, they wouldn't *have* a savings account in a few months, not on just Jack's salary, since the city's latest financial crisis had required him to take a pay cut. Taxes had gone up again too, both state and federal, so she was saving all the money that the government would have taken and squandered in her name if she'd been on someone's payroll. Gosh, when you *really* thought about it, being laid off after ten years at IBM wasn't a tragedy, not even a crisis, but a virtual *festival* of life-enhancing change.

"Give it a rest, Heather," she warned herself, closing up the carton of sherbet and returning it to the freezer.

Jack, ever the grinning optimist, said nothing could be gained by dwelling on bad news, and he was right, of course. His upbeat nature, genial personality, and resilient heart had made it possible for him to endure a nightmarish childhood and adolescence that would have broken many people.

More recently, his philosophy had served him well as he'd struggled through the worst year of his career with the Department. After almost a decade together on the streets, he and Tommy Fernandez had been as close as brothers. Tommy had been dead more than eleven months now, but at least one

night a week Jack woke from vivid dreams in which his partner and friend was dying again. He always slipped from bed and went to the kitchen for a post-midnight beer or to the living room just to sit alone in the darkness awhile, unaware that Heather had been awakened by the soft cries that escaped him in his sleep. On other nights, months ago, she had learned that she could neither do nor say anything to help him; he needed to be by himself. After he left the room, she often reached out beneath the covers to put her hand on the sheets, which were still warm with his body heat and damp with the perspiration wrung out of him by anguish.

In spite of everything, Jack remained a walking advertisement for the power of positive thinking. Heather was determined to match his cheerful disposition and his capacity for hope.

At the sink, she rinsed the residue of sherbet off the scoop.

Her own mother, Sally, was a world-class whiner who viewed every piece of bad news as a personal catastrophe, even if the event that disturbed her had occurred at the farthest end of the earth and had involved only total strangers. Political unrest in the Philippines could set Sally off on a despairing monologue about the higher prices she believed she would be forced to pay for sugar and for everything containing sugar if the Philippine cane crop was destroyed in a bloody civil war. A hangnail was as troublesome to her as a broken arm to an ordinary person, a headache invariably signaled an impending stroke, and a minor ulcer in the mouth was a sure sign of terminal cancer. The woman *thrived* on bad news and gloom.

Eleven years ago, when Heather was twenty, she'd been delighted to cease being a Beckerman and to become a McGarvey—unlike some friends, in that era of burgeoning feminism, who had continued to use their maiden names after marriage or resorted to hyphenated surnames. She wasn't the first child in history who became determined to be nothing whatsoever like her parents, but she liked to think she was extraordinarily diligent about ridding herself of parental traits.

As she got a spoon out of a drawer, picked up the bowl full of sherbet, and went into the living room, Heather realized another upside to being unemployed was that she didn't have to miss work to care for Toby when he was home sick from school or hire a sitter to look after him. She could be right there where he needed her and suffer none of the guilt of a working mom.

Of course, their health insurance had covered only eighty percent of the cost of the visit to the doctor's office on Monday morning, and the twenty-percent co-payment had caught her attention as never before. It had seemed huge. But that was Beckerman thinking, not McGarvey thinking.

Toby was in his pajamas in an armchair in the living room, in front of the television, legs stretched out on a footstool, covered in blankets. He was watching cartoons on a cable channel that programmed exclusively for kids.

Heather knew to the penny what the cable subscription cost. Back in October, when she'd still had a job, she'd have had to guess at the amount and might not have come within five dollars of it.

On the TV, a tiny mouse was chasing a cat, which had apparently been hypnotized into believing that the mouse was six feet tall with fangs and blood-red eyes.

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