

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

DEAN KOONTZ



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RED RAIN

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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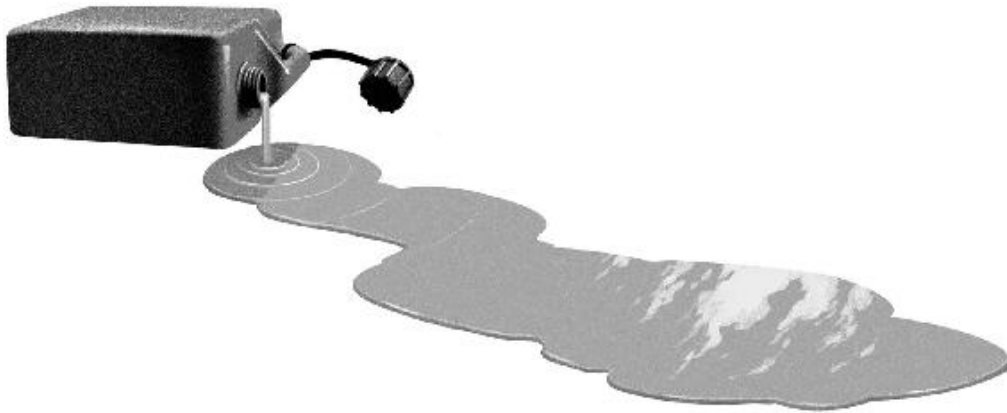
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1

The sole passenger aboard a Gulfstream V, the man who has no name doesn't look through a window at the world below, but at a photograph of Regina Belmont's once lovely and now disfigured face, wondering at her courage after the terrible losses she has suffered. As the jet descends through the lashing storm, he returns the photo to the envelope. He will leave it behind to be eliminated along with all other evidence that he was ever aboard the aircraft.

As the soot-gray sky dissolves in torrents that rap and rattle against every surface, the rain-swept city below stands tall and proud. Its rotting foundations are known by everyone to be corrupted and unsound, though few dare say as much except in the privacy of their homes.

On this day, the tide laps the city's shores, and the deeps beyond are less like mere water than like some shrewd and knowing entity, an amorphous mass that might at any time rise in apocalyptic fury to cleanse the metropolis.

During the flight, Nameless has listened to a twenty-three-minute recording that identifies the next target and explains the mission. He is eager to get on with it.

He has no luggage. He disembarks with only the novel he has been reading, *The Violent Bear It Away*.

On the tarmac stands a black limousine. The driver waits with an umbrella. They exchange no words as thunder rolls.

Nameless does not take for granted the efficiency of Ace of Diamonds and the unknown organization in providing planes and cars and all the other things he needs. He executes many missions alone, but when others assist, they use names that aren't their real ones, do what is needed, and are gone. Nameless's existence is a lonely one, but he is never melancholy; a certain amount of solitude suits him. Anyway, between periods of solitude, there is much meaningful and satisfying action.

When he's in the limo, he finds a small white envelope on the seat. It contains an electronic key card to the suite at the hotel where he is already registered as John Watson. Two large locked suitcases, left in the bedroom closet of the suite, will provide everything he needs from clothes to weapons.

In addition, the envelope contains two other keys, one of them to a paneled Ford van. Among the fleet of various vehicles owned by the city's sanitation department, there are vans of this make and model. The Ford bears the municipal shield on each front door, is emblazoned with the words **DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH**, further asserts its authority with the words **EMERGENCY RESPONSE**, and bears license plates identifying it as belonging to the city, though it is not in fact public property. However, it can go anywhere without drawing undue attention and can be parked in any no-parking zone without risk of being ticketed or towed, allowing Nameless the degree of mobility that he requires in this crowded metropolis.

Also in the limo are a black thigh-length rain slicker with a hood and a small tote bag. He dons the garment over his jeans and crewneck sweater, and sits with the tote between his feet.

The car passes through an industrial area, then through canyons of glass towers bright with reflections of lightning;

here money is chased by enterprises both legitimate and criminal. Finally they come to brick and cinder-block tenements, where the false-flag sanitation-department Ford van is parked at a red curb, in defiance of a sign that threatens scofflaws.

Hood up and slicker zippered to his throat, the man who is not John Watson exits the limo. He passes behind the van and climbs the puddled steps to the front door of the apartment house, which saw its best days maybe sixty years earlier.

The woman's apartment is on the fourth floor. Nameless doesn't trust the elevator. He takes the stairs, where a third of the light fixtures aren't functional.

The fourth-floor hallway smells of stale cooking odors and marijuana smoke and vaguely of urine.

He rings the bell and senses her assessing him through the fish-eye lens. The door opens on a heavy-duty security chain. Through the gap, one blue-flecked gray eye regards him, unblinking, like the stare of an inhabitant of an aquarium peering through the glass between that safe small world and a larger dangerous one.

Because he will use the John Watson name nowhere but at the hotel, he says, "Paul Drake, ma'am. We spoke on the phone."

Regina Belmont closes the door just long enough to disengage the chain. When she opens it again, Nameless smiles and meets her eyes and does not dwell even for a moment on the right half of her face.

From the photo he saw previously, he knows the extent of the disfigurement. Even after multiple surgeries and skin grafts, her countenance is a testament to the ravenous appetite of fire fed by a volatile accelerant. That half of her face can never be made right.

She's lucky not to have been blinded in one eye. Lucky that her hair grew back. Lucky that she lived. But that is the extent of her luck. She lost the little finger and ring finger on her right hand, which seems eerily symbolic because she also

lost her two small children in the fire, three-year-old Sherry and five-year-old Andy.

“Come in, Mr. Drake.”

He has taken off his slicker and intends to leave it in the hall. But Regina hangs it on a coat tree; it drips on a rubber mat.

“Quite a storm,” he says. “And another one supposed to be coming in right after it.”

She says, “I love rain. I can sit by a window and watch it all afternoon.”

He wonders if rain appeals to her because it is the opposite of fire.

2

Regina Belmont's living room is a modest space, comfortably but cheaply furnished. Books overflow shelves, are stacked on the floor.

The only light issues from a lamp beside the sofa on which perhaps she was curled up, reading, when he rang the bell.

He suspects that on sunny days she draws the blinds and lives always with a single lamp. She wants shadows not because of how she looks, but because the sharp edges and bright surfaces of reality cut at her. She dwells in sadness, of which these shadows are a reflection.

She indicates an armchair. Nameless sits in it with the tote. The air is redolent of fresh-brewed coffee, which she offers. He declines. She settles in a second chair.

The lamp by the sofa is to her right, so that the damaged side of her face is not the half in shadow. This does not seem to be by chance, but by calculation.

"The check came, and I deposited it," she says.

The draft she received was for six thousand dollars. "You'll get another like it every month."

"I'm grateful, but I don't understand. What is the Heartcraft Trust?"

"It might be hard to believe, but I don't know. I know only that you were identified as a desired recipient, the trust pays all taxes on your stipend, and you'll receive a statement each January."

"But you work for them. You must know more."

"No, I don't work for the trust. I'm . . . an intermediary."

She'd no doubt find it even harder to believe that he doesn't know his true name or the identities of the people who support the work that he does. His memory goes back only two years, to the moment when he set out on the first of these

missions; the other thirty-some years of his life are lost behind a wall of amnesia. Regina might also find it difficult to believe that his amnesia seems not to be a natural occurrence but has been engineered, almost certainly with his approval.

“What am I to do in return for all this money?” she wonders.

“You once taught English. You write well. Keep a journal of your progress and submit it to Heartcraft each January.”

“My progress toward what?”

“Through grief to acceptance. Through anger and post-traumatic stress toward peace. From what I gather, they research such matters and develop programs to help people.”

That is a lie. He has no idea what Heartcraft Trust is or does, other than give money to those who have suffered gravely.

As they speak, Regina Belmont never seeks to minimize the visibility of her disfigurement. She seems to accept her horrific scars as deserved punishment, though she should have no guilt whatsoever regarding her children’s death. To be the sole survivor, however, must weigh heavily on her heart, separate from the burden of grief.

She says quietly, “I’m still damn angry, and stressed. I haven’t made any progress in two years. And the grief . . . it’s forever.”

“Then write about that. They want honesty.”

For a moment, she stares at the rain washing down the windows, the city shrouded in the storm. The masked heavens, crackling with fitful fire, are as mysterious as they are even on sunny days.

“I once would have bristled at the very idea of taking charity. Now look at me.”

“It’s not charity,” he asserts, although he’s pretty sure that’s exactly what it is. “They really want your ongoing journal.”

“And how long do I get paid?”

“The rest of your life.”

She turns her attention from the windows. Because her face is essentially two faces, a countenance divided against itself, reading her expression is difficult. “What else am I expected to do?”

“Nothing. There’s something it’s *hoped* you’ll do, but if you want no part of it, you’ll still get your monthly check.”

“So tell me.”

“If you’ll answer a few questions, that would be helpful.”

She stares at him and says nothing.

He takes her silence as permission to ask what he wants. “For a while, between your surgeries and skin grafts, you were adamant that the fire must have been arson. You challenged city officials. You lobbied the press to investigate. Why did you suddenly stop?”

“Everybody’s bought, and everything’s politicized. There’s no way to get the truth.”

“Were you threatened?”

The twin scalpels of her stare seem to perform exploratory surgery on his mind, his motives. She must wonder if he might be something other than he professes, if maybe his purpose is to learn if she will talk—and then to silence her forever if she does.

Who knows who anyone really is these days? She not only lost her children, but also her husband, who was away on business the night of the fire. He filed for divorce after his first visit to the hospital, when he saw the severity of her burns. She hadn’t really known even *him*, her own husband, hadn’t known how immature, gutless, and faithless he would prove to be.

At last she decides to trust her visitor. “I stayed with my cousin for a while, but I needed to have my own place, to feel I could get some kind of life back. So I rented this apartment six months ago. It was all I could afford, but it was something.

I'm here not a week when I come back from a medical appointment one afternoon and these two thugs are waiting."

The memory is evidently hard on her, maybe because it's when she lost her dignity, of which even her disfigurement hadn't been able to rob her. She gets up and goes to one of the two windows, staring out at the storm as she talks.

"I didn't know they were here until I'm halfway across the living room, and they come out of the kitchen. I've got nowhere to run. They make me sit on the sofa. One of them sits beside me. The other sits where you're sitting, and all the time he's playing with a butane lighter, flicking it on, off, on."

Spider legs of lightning skitter down the sky, and the rain tracks on the windowpanes are fleetingly projected onto everything in the living room.

"They were blunt," she says, as thunder vibrates in the rain-washed glass. She quotes them. "Stop pushing the fire marshal's office, hag face. Stop haranguing the cops, you ugly bitch. Stop goading the media to investigate. You make the Bride of Frankenstein look like Jennifer Lawrence, Regina. Nobody pities you. Nobody gives a shit about your dead kids. No one *meant* for them to die. They were collateral damage. Everybody just wants you to get over it, shut the fuck up, go away, stop making everyone sick at the sight of you."

She falls silent.

Her distress is palpable. Nameless gets up from the chair, intending to go to her, but he senses that she needs distance between them in order to speak of her humiliation.

"They tell me that if I keep agitating about arson, they'll snatch me when I'm out some night, when I least expect it. They'll take me to the cemetery where Sherry and Andy are buried, right to their graves, soak me in gasoline, set me on fire, do it in such a way it looks like suicide. I believe them. They've got everyone in their pocket, from people in the medical examiner's office to the fire marshal's investigators, to the police. They can get away with anything. So they'll do it; they'll burn me. The one with the butane lighter will even enjoy doing it. Maybe the other one will, too."

She turns from the window, looks at him. A series of lightning strikes glimmers through the distorting currents of the falling sea, an eerie throbbing incandescence that backlights her, surrounds her with a trembling aura, as though she might be a manifesting spirit rather than a woman of flesh and bone.

In that weird moment, he thinks that he could love her; no, he feels that he *has* loved her before he ever knew she existed. As this strange perception clarifies, he realizes that Regina reminds him of someone he has loved in the past, loved and lost to some tragedy. He reaches for the memory, strains toward it. But his amnesia isn't merely a fog overlaying the past; it is an unbreachable wall.

The feeling passes with the long barrage of stormlight.

As the subsequent thunder rumbles through the drowned day like a chorus of schooling leviathans, Regina says, "Is something wrong?"

He turns from the lost past to the fleeting present. "Those who killed your children and think of it as just collateral damage—do you want them dead?"

3

She stares at him in silence so long that he feels the need to repeat the question. “Do you want them dead?”

After a hesitation, she says, “I want justice.”

“Justice is a human concept, as flawed as any. There is no reliable justice in this world and, given human nature, never can be. Politics, bigotry, envy, ignorance . . . Those forces and others redefine justice day by day, until it means something different to everyone—until it means nothing at all.”

“If there’s no hope, why are you here, why did you ask?”

“There’s hope, though not in justice. There’s hope in truth. A sea of lies can’t wash away a single grain of truth. Truth is what it is.”

“And you can find the truth?”

“We’ve already found it.”

“Heartcraft Trust is in the truth-finding business?”

“Not them. There are others I work with.”

“Who?”

“I’m not at liberty to name them,” he replies, which isn’t a lie, only another way of saying that he doesn’t know.

“I don’t want them dead,” she says. “I want them in jail.”

“That’ll never happen in this city or this state. Their kind infect everything. They’re six ways insulated from prosecution. The district attorney, attorney general, key police officials, half the judges, half the politicians, certain influential media—they’re in it together. They’re about power, nothing but power. People drunk with power don’t believe in justice except as a word in one slogan or another. They despise the truth, and your dead children are less than a speed bump on the fast track to their own private utopia.”

Regina hugs herself, as though chilled. “It sounds like you and whoever you work with have already made up your minds

to kill them.”

“Over the past fifteen years, more than just your children have died in arson cases that were deemed accidental fires. These people costume themselves in lies. We’ll introduce them to the truth.”

“Why do you want my approval?”

“Not your approval. We want to be sure you understand the risks and are willing to get out of the way of danger. Until recently, you’ve been a very public advocate against corruption in the fire marshal’s office and elsewhere. When the arsonist and certain other responsible parties meet their fate . . .”

She gets it. “Their friends will come here asking questions.”

Nameless points to the tote on the floor beside the armchair where he’d been sitting. “That contains thirty thousand in cash, twenties and hundreds. Moving money.”

Neither the amount of money nor the fact that it comes without strings seems to surprise her. The opportunity he’s offered her must strike her as being a miracle, albeit one with a dark edge, and no one but a fool questions a miracle too aggressively.

She says, “Where would I move?”

“You’re close to your sister, Irene. You really like the little town she lives in, and it’s safely out of state. Start a new life. If you’ll agree to that, a woman calling herself Della Street will come by at nine in the morning to help you pack. You have no car?”

“No. I use public transport.”

“Della will drive you to your sister’s place. Once you’re settled in a new state, you’ll get a driver’s license there, a car.”

Still wrapped in her arms, she turns away, gazing into the storm, which perhaps mirrors a tempest within her.

When he realizes she may need some time to think, Nameless says, “Is it all right with you if I pour myself some

of that coffee? It smells incredible.”

“Yeah, sure,” she agrees, without turning from the window.

The kitchen is small, the appliances dated, but everything is spotless. He opens cabinets until he finds a mug. He needs no sugar or cream.

In the living room, he goes to the second window, which is in the same wall as the first, and he stands there sipping the coffee. Gutters are overflowing in the street below. Although torrents have been washing the city since before dawn, the runoff is filthy.

After a while, Regina says, “Paul?”

“What?”

“All right.”

“All right?”

“I’ll take the money. I’ll move. And . . .”

“And?”

“I want them dead.”

4

The aging warehouse is in an even older industrial area, a grunge land of corrugated-metal and cinder-block structures, of smokestacks and standpipes and chain-link fences topped with concertina wire.

Nameless parks the department of health van near a man-size door. He lets himself into the building with the other key that he had found in the envelope that had been left for him in the limo.

When he switches on the lights, the interior is cavernous. Office spaces framed and windowed at the far end. Open stairs leading up to more offices above the first array. Open wood-framed walls without drywall. Catwalks. Forty feet overhead, massive wood rafters, collar beams, joists, and outriggers. Plenty to burn.

Here on the vast ground floor are stacks of wooden pallets, perhaps a thousand of them. A forklift. Two motorized carts.

At the center of this space stands a four-foot-square, eight-foot-tall cage, solidly built of two-by-fours and heavy-gauge chicken wire.

After touring the catwalk, satisfied that Ace's reliable team has prepared the place for tomorrow night, he descends to the ground level, switches off the lights, locks the door, returns to the van.

Later, in the heart of the city, he parks in the wide alleyway behind his hotel, enters through the receiving room where supplies are delivered, makes his way through the busy kitchen for one of the establishment's three restaurants, finds the main lobby, takes the elevator to the ninth floor, and with the key card lets himself into his suite, where his luggage awaits him.

Ace of Diamonds has sent a fruit basket. Whether male or female or something else, Ace is not just a brilliant strategist

and tactician, but also thoughtful.

5

Danny Doyle knows everything there is to know about fire. No one can more quickly calculate the fuel load, the total Btu per square foot, of any structure and its contents. He can quote you the heat-release rate of the combined material involved without using a calculator, just compute it all in his head. Any ignition device he builds will go from first spark through the free-burning phase to the flashover phase faster than a goose can poop. Danny has fire in his arteries and veins, in his loins.

Just ask Jolie, the hooker who right this minute is melting into ecstasy under him. They've been at it for two hours, but she can't get enough of him. He is so hot. He's like a young Richard Gere, but hotter. He's like Bradley Cooper but better endowed; he's pretty sure about that. He could have any woman he wants. He prefers hookers because with them there's no obligation to think about the future. Danny doesn't believe in the future. He believes in *now*. So does Jolie, who's saying, "Now, now, now!"

When they're done, she'll probably want to return his money because she's had such a good time, been taken to the moon and back. But he'll insist on paying, because if he doesn't pay, she'll think it's love or something, and Danny doesn't believe in love. Love is just a racket, it's what other people use to tie you to them, tie you down, tie you up, tie you in knots. Danny is too hot for love.

As Jolie is leaving, she says, "You've got a great apartment, baby. Ask for me again sometime. This is a fun place."

It is truly a great apartment, on the tenth floor of a twelve-story building, a corner unit combined with a second unit, three thousand square feet, with incredible windows. He's thirty-four, and he's done all right for himself. His old man wanted him to go to law school, and his mom wanted him to be a priest, of all things; but he doesn't believe in either the law or God. He believes in himself, and he believes in fire. He

has loved fire all his life, and fire has made him rich, starting with the one he set in which his parents perished, leaving him a major inheritance when he was twenty-two.

No better fire mechanic exists than Danny Edan Doyle. He's in demand. He has designed and executed dozens of blazes in the city and out of it. He could take more work than he does, but he's risk averse. He has to trust the client, who must come recommended by a former client or by an investigator, Nelson Wallace, in the fire marshal's office; Nelson gets a commission from Danny.

There are two reasons that people hire an arsonist. To bilk an insurance company or for vengeance. Other fires are perpetrated by crazy people—pyromaniacs. Those are *acts of arson*, but the loonies who set them can't fairly call themselves arsonists. A true arsonist is knowledgeable, calculating, and as professional as any attorney or doctor. Danny is not a pyromaniac; he is a pyrophile and a fine pyrochemist.

After Jolie leaves, Danny pours Macallan Scotch over ice and sits at the stainless-steel desk in his spacious study. This huge piece of furniture features a caramel-gold picture-stone top mined in South Africa.

From a drawer, he retrieves his plans for a church fire. It's an unusual job. The client, José del Rio, is motivated by vengeance rather than money. The church is where he married Jackie. She also took José for thirty million in a contentious divorce and now lives with her fitness instructor. She chose the church back in the day. Although José hates Jackie, he still loves her. He can't bring himself to burn her. And he figures if he burns the fitness trainer, she'll just find another one even younger. So it's the church. Go figure. Fortunately, there's a huge mother of an antiquated oil-fired furnace that can be cleverly rigged to pass for an accident, especially when Nelson Wallace heads the investigation.

Danny has hardly begun to review his plan when one of his two smartphones rings, the one ostensibly owned by an elementary-school teacher in the suburbs. If a reason ever arises for the authorities to track down the true ownership of

this cell, they'll need to be so crackerjack that they could also find and capture Bigfoot if they wanted. He doesn't recognize the calling number, but it's all but certain to be a former client.

"You know who this is?" the caller asks.

Danny says, "Give me a hint."

"I thought maybe you'd recognize my voice, Big D. We used to hang out at this little nightclub together."

Danny recognizes the voice as that of Vincent Cardanzio. What Vince means by "hang out" is that Danny once burned down a failing night club that Vince owned, overinsured, and needed to be rid of.

"Yeah, yeah," Danny says. "I got you now. You da man."

"I got this best friend, he needs some, you know, financial advice."

"Better me than Goldman Sachs."

"Ain't that the truth. Anyway, when he calls, he'll say his name is Rockwell."

Which means his name isn't really Rockwell. That's all right with Danny Doyle, whose name wasn't always Danny Doyle and, if his luck turns bad, won't be Danny Doyle in the future. It is always better to deal with people smart enough to understand the wisdom of having a flexible identity in this fast-paced ever-changing high-tech world.

"You do right by my friend," says Vince, "and you'll be family to me."

Being family to Vince is a big deal. Through dozens of limited liability companies, Vince owns two hundred—maybe more—properties in the city and its suburbs. The volatile nature of the economy at present and for the foreseeable future ensures that, every year, at least one of those residences or enterprises will be more valuable torched than left standing.

Danny is impressed. "Family. I know you'd never say that lightly. I'm touched, I really am, humbled and touched, and I'll take care of your friend better than I would my own father."

6

Nameless is dining in the best restaurant in his hotel when he receives a text message from Ace. DANNY IS EXPECTING YOUR CALL, ROCKWELL.

He finishes his dinner, returns to his suite, and uses the smartphone provided for this mission to call the arsonist recommended to him by his friend Vincent, whom he has never met.

Vincent Cardanzio holds title to his many properties through a bewildering number of limited partnerships that are in turn owned by limited liability companies, some of which are owned by offshore trusts. He insures those properties through twenty-four insurance companies, in order that no carrier will receive more than one fire-related claim in any two-year period, and not more than one every five years from any single LP or LLC. Nevertheless, Ace's team of data chasers has been able to identify him as a serial beneficiary of fire-insurance payments and have linked him to Danny Edan Doyle.

Because the highly respected Mr. Cardanzio is often invited by both the city council and committees of the state legislature to provide expert testimony regarding the impact of pending legislation on real estate development and other key business sectors, a lot of video and audio of him exist in the public record. With all those samples to build from, Ace is able to employ the Paramimic computer program to translate anyone's voice into a replica of Cardanzio's, even during a real-time telephone call.

Furthermore, because of a rootkit inserted in the telecom provider's computer system, Ace is able to route the call to Danny Doyle through Cardanzio's smartphone, making it appear legitimate. Cardanzio's service account has also been compromised so that any call to him from Doyle will not ring through but will go to voice mail. As soon as the message is completed, it will be sent from Cardanzio's voice mail to Ace's and be simultaneously erased from Cardanzio's.

Consequently, if Danny Doyle places a call to Cardanzio to confirm the referral involving Rockwell, Ace will receive it and will return it, using Paramimic, in the voice of Cardanzio.

In this brave new world, there is no place for a lone paladin venturing forth on tasks of knightly honor. Both Galahad and Shane would be toast. In times as complex as these, any caped crusader must work sans cape, but with backup that amounts to scores of specialists.

As he inputs Doyle's phone number, Nameless wonders how deep are the pockets of those who fund these missions.

The arsonist answers the call. "Yeah?"

"A short while ago, a friend referred me to you."

"You couldn't have a better reference."

"We need to meet soon."

"At the venue," Doyle says, meaning at the place to be torched.

After Nameless provides the address and sets a meeting for ten o'clock the following evening, he terminates the call.

In the living room of the suite, he settles down with his book, *The Violent Bear It Away*. He's at the point where the boy, Tarwater, is setting the woods afire, when the page seems to explode silently, casting millions of tiny bits of paper in his face, whiting out the room around him before the vision floods upon him in vivid color.

A montage of images, maybe sequential, maybe not, shuffle through his mind: *A dimpled little girl with a ponytail, holding a floppy-eared plush-toy rabbit (the scent of peppermint); pale early light, a great blue heron, four feet tall, foraging in shallow water, long neck craning up from a search for a fingerling or frog, one yellow eye with large black pupil regarding him with foreboding (from it, a rapid, throaty kok-kok-kok); a young blond waitress in a white uniform with blue trim, smiling as she places a menu on the table before him (the aroma of coffee); a sullen-looking bearded man, glancing at him, his stare poisonous, green eyes like distilled venom; some kind of stone or concrete tower, tall and arched, seen through*

a rain-spattered windshield, wipers sweeping back and forth (thump-thump, thump-thump); a swarm of vehicles, trucks and cars, sliding-colliding on rain-slick blacktop, sliding-colliding-tumbling (blaring horns); the floppy-eared toy rabbit lying in the rain, still in the grip of a child's severed hand (screaming).

Nameless thrusts up from the chair. He is gasping for breath. His heart races. He feels as if he's been gut-punched.

During the past two years, he's had moments of clairvoyance, sometimes bearing witness to things that have happened, sometimes receiving a glimpse of a horror yet to come. However, he has only once before experienced a montage like this, images flashing at him like quick cuts in a film, with smells and sounds—and it was this identical sequence of these same scenes. Never until now has a vision repeated, which suggests this one is more urgent and of greater importance than others he has endured.

He assumes these episodes are related to whatever procedure erased his memory, that this clairvoyance is also engineered, the consequence of some strange science.

He is shaken not just by what he has seen, but also by an oppressive sense of responsibility, responsibility not just to bring truth to Danny Doyle and give Regina Belmont hope, but as well for something he might have done or failed to do in the lost past.

Regina . . . Regina . . . The name echoes along the corridors of his mind, through empty chambers from which amnesia has removed all furnishings. Presences haunt that abandoned mental architecture, people he once knew, who might be dead or might still be alive but dead to memory. He says aloud, "Regina," and in the ghost-ridden halls within his skull, a figure floats, more mist than material, a beautiful woman with pale hair and purple-blue eyes, who passes in a moment and recedes into a darkness where he cannot follow.

The possibility that his amnesia is breaking down alarms him. He might need to insist upon its renewal. He suspects there is no comfort equal to the comfort of not knowing.

He goes to a window and stares out at the city lights, at the city darkneses enfolded between its more luminous facades. The sky remains overcast, and the underlit bellies of the clouds are rancid yellow as they scud eastward, but the rain has stopped.

The entire vision—from the ponytailed imp with peppermint breath to the toy rabbit lying on rain-puddled pavement in the grip of a hand without its girl—surely must be a premonition of terror oncoming. Whether it is a chain-reaction traffic accident involving many vehicles or something else, he can't imagine how it can evolve from—or have a connection to—Danny Doyle. It must be an event that will occur a week from now, or in a month, a year.

After preparing for bed, he at first does not want to lie down. He prefers to turn off the lights and sit by the window and pore over the vision, recalling to mind every detail in search of clues that will tell him *where*, tell him *when*.

Another strangeness and an irony: Although he remembers nothing of his previous life, he possesses a faultless memory of all he has seen and heard in the past two years. He has the ability to cycle through the vision repeatedly, seeing it as clearly the tenth time as he did the first, examining each instant for telling details.

However, after a third tour through that clairvoyant montage, when no clue presents itself, he can't bear to sift the images once more, because he is beginning to suspect that the horror he has foreseen is inevitable.

Often—in fact usually—he is able to act to purge the future of the tragedy that has been shown to him, though occasionally he fails. To be fair to himself, perhaps he should accept that some fates are sewn into the fabric of time with tighter stitches than others. The possibility exists that no one, even if possessing greater powers than his, can strip the future of all hardships, threats, and tragedies. Utopias, after all, are sought mostly by great fools, though also by dangerous charlatans, and more death and pain has been brought down on humanity by the pursuit of a perfect world than by all other crime combined.

Distressed but not despairing, he makes his way through the ill-lighted room to the bed. Tomorrow he will arrange for Death to visit those who deserve it, and the innocent will be slightly safer than they were, though the world will remain dark. Humble goals and modest expectations are more likely to be fulfilled than are utopian dreams.

His head touches the pillow. He sleeps. He does not dream.

7

The rain begins again at four o'clock Thursday afternoon, in time to snarl rush-hour traffic.

Water comes to shore in escalating white-crested waves. Windblown debris smashes windows, scrapes painted walls, strips park plants of their leaves. Lightning plays at being Danny Edan Doyle, setting a tree ablaze here, igniting an historic Victorian house over there.

A few thousand years of weather will eventually reduce a city to its component elements and fields of rubble, though its more restive citizens are likely to get the job done faster.

At nine thirty that night, Nameless parks the fake department of health van behind the warehouse and lets himself in through a man-size door different from the one that he used the previous day. He doesn't want an apparently official vehicle to spook Danny Doyle.

He turns on the lights and strips out of his rain slicker and drapes it on a stack of pallets. He opens the door that he wants Doyle to use and puts down the stop that will hold it that way.

8

Yesterday, Danny spent hours online, tracking the ownership of the warehouse. His search proved inconclusive. A series of LPs and LLCs and standard corporations fit inside one another like an array of Chinese boxes. He obtained the names of those on various boards of directors who might have been real people, although some seemed to have died in years past and others had a ghostly feel. None of them was named John Rockwell or Rockwell Smith or Rockwell Rockwell. The resultant obfuscation convinces him that he's dealing with his kind of people, clever operators who know how to cover their asses, and he isn't suspicious when he arrives at the warehouse. A door stands open, a figure backlit, as if to say, *Here I am, nothing to hide, vulnerable and in need of your services.*

Danny Doyle arrives alone in a Lamborghini Huracan that growls out of the storm as though not manufactured, but instead born of lightning and thunder.

The arsonist is a fit but bland-looking man with well-barbered blond hair, white-blond eyebrows that all but disappear, eyes the pale blue of robin eggs, skin so smooth that he might not have any need to shave, and teeth as white and flawless as Lladró porcelain.

He has the soft, reassuring voice of a therapist and the enthusiasm of a football coach always confident of a championship season. He loves to talk about fire: basic oxidation reactions, heat-release rates, electrical causation, chemical causations . . .

If Nameless is going to kill this man or set him up to be killed, he wants to know him, who he is other than a fire mechanic, whether he's got redeeming qualities that to any extent somewhat mitigate his responsibility for the human suffering that results when one of his fires involves unintended "collateral damage."

Doyle likes the potential burnability of the warehouse—the wood-framed walls and elaborate rafters; the thousand or more wood pallets—but he'd like see a lot of plastic in the place. Per pound, wood gives off 8,000 Btu of heat versus 16,000 Btu from plastic.

Raising his voice to compete with a cannonade of thunder and rushing battalions of rain, he says, "You want the fire as hot as possible as long as possible. The hotter and longer it goes, the less evidence that remains."

"I'll bring in shelving to hold eighteen thousand dog toys made in China," Nameless lies. "Can't be sold in the US. Toxic chemicals in the man-made fiber. I paid six cents on the dollar. For insurance purposes, I'm carrying them on the books at full wholesale."

“Sweet,” Doyle says. “I despise insurance companies almost as much as I love fire. Some man-made fibers burn as hot as plastic.”

They are standing near the man-size cage of lumber and heavy-gauge chicken wire. Doyle doesn't find anything curious about it.

Nameless says, “I've also got twelve thousand dolls, twenty-six dollars wholesale. Rubber and plastic parts, some that can detach and be swallowed by little kids. The manufacturer got a thumbs-down from the Consumer Product Safety Commission. I paid fourteen cents on the dollar. It's a three-hundred-thousand-dollar payday on dolls alone. Then there'll be a variety of closeout toys I got for seventy percent discount from wholesale. So the contents *and* building . . . I'm looking for two point four million after costs.”

“I'm in. I guess Vince Cardanzio told you I'm not your typical torch. I'm Rolls-Royce, not Mazda. I get a ten percent commission. In advance.”

“No problem. I'm impressed by your reputation, and I value your expertise, Mr. Doyle. In fact, I hope you'll advise me how to set up all the shelving so it conducts airflow and doesn't block oxygen from the fire.”

Doyle stands taller, pleased by the praise. “I'll measure the space with a laser tonight, have a shelving layout tomorrow.”

“One more thing. I'm doing this because I'm in a pinch, but my business is toys—kids and dogs. I love kids and dogs, so naturally I worry . . .”

Doyle frowns. He doesn't like to hear about worry. He's an optimistic, can-do kind of guy. “What worry?”

“I don't want some fireman to die or be hurt. Maybe he's got kids at home.”

The arsonist's demeanor brightens. “I got contacts. They'll know to come at this one carefully, no gonzo bullshit like in that old Ron Howard movie about firefighters. No one'll even stub a toe.”

“I just worry . . . I remember that awful fire, a couple years ago, two children died, a little boy and girl. The mother was badly burned, too, said it was arson.”

Doyle’s smile is that of a Buddha who knows the miseries of life to be transient and of no importance. “You’re talking about that bookstore fire, apartments above it. It was a seriously old building, a shit-house structure, didn’t *need* arson, a fire waiting to happen. That wasn’t one of mine.” He is lying; it was his, all right. “Anyway, shit happens. It happens to all of us. But there aren’t going to be any kids here.”

Nameless takes a small pump-spray bottle from an inside jacket pocket.

“What’s that?” Doyle asks.

Rather than explain, Nameless sprays him point-blank in the face with chloroform.

The arsonist’s pale-blue eyes pale further. When he folds to the floor as though boneless, he licks his lips because chloroform has a sweet taste.

10

Danny Doyle dreams of being on top of the blonde named Jolie, and everything he kisses tastes sweet. He is full of fire, hotter than hot—he's got napalm in his veins!—and she's crying out in ecstasy, "*Now, now, now.*" Everything is beautiful; it could go on forever as far as he's concerned—and he has the stamina, he can wear out a dozen women!—but then she says that she loves him. She reveals an engagement ring that he has apparently given her, and the dream morphs into a nightmare from which he wakes—

And finds himself standing in a cage the size of a small elevator, his arms spread and zip tied to a pair of four-by-fours. Actually, he's not standing. He has no strength in his legs. He's hanging by his arms, which ache, as do his shoulders and neck. Recovery comes quickly, however, and he gets his feet under himself, takes the strain off his arms.

Rockwell is standing at the cage door, watching through the chicken wire. The smug bastard.

Danny knows better than to rant or make threats. He simply says, "Vince Cardanzio's going to put you in a grave when he finds out about this." Lightning blazing at the high windows and thunder slamming the night seem to punctuate the threat.

"That wasn't Cardanzio on the phone. He doesn't know about this. And he's never going to find out."

Years earlier, on a mattress-factory job, this retiree security guy, a snuff-sucking gimp who was supposed to be sleeping in the guard shack after drinking drugged coffee, walks in on them when they're setting up the ignition device. They take him down, tie him up. So the geezer starts cursing them, making threats, promising to see them in prison, as though it never occurs to him that he isn't getting out of the night alive, that he's going to burn. The old guy made a fool of himself.

Danny Doyle has too much pride for that. He's no fool. He just stares back at his captor and waits.

Rockwell takes a small recorder from a pocket, clicks it on, and sets it on a two-by-four that's part of the cage but beyond Danny's reach.

"That job where the kids died," Rockwell says, "was yours. We researched archived GPS data, and we're able to place you at that address on the night of. In fact, through GPS data, we can place various vehicles of yours at twenty-six arson sites over the past eleven years, on the very nights they were torched. You own shell companies that receive fat consulting contracts from other shell companies owned by people who benefited from insurance claims related to fires."

In spite of himself, Doyle says, "GPS archives? What're you talking about? Who the hell are you?"

Rockwell stares at him in silence for a moment and then says, "Not just those two kids. Four other deaths, collateral damage."

Danny thinks it was five others, but who's counting? "What do you want?"

"I want the truth to prevail. But you're so well connected that all the evidence in the world won't get the law to move against you. There'll be no justice. But for you, at least, there will be the truth and its consequences."

Rockwell starts the forklift and begins to move some of the wood pallets, stacking them around three sides of the cage. Fuel.

This is psychological warfare, and Danny counsels himself not to be affected by it. If Rockwell really wants him dead, he could just shoot him.

Nevertheless, as pallets are stacked high around the cage, Danny's nerves fray. He loves fire, lives for fire. Fire has been good for him. But he's smart enough to *fear* it. He's never present when a fire begins, not merely to avoid incrimination, but because the heat-release rate of his fires is such that if he struck a match and lit the accelerant himself—usually

kerosene—he would be ablaze before he could get out of the building. The ignition device allows him to be miles and hours away before the beast erupts.

More pallets. Stacked on three sides. Rockwell is leaving the cage door unobstructed, suggesting Danny still has a way out of this if he confesses. But he has a strong genetic aversion to confession. Anyway, he doesn't believe he's doing anything wrong. He's only doing what's necessary. To make a living. To survive. To be a man others respect. People die in car wrecks, but that doesn't mean the workers who make the cars ought to go to prison. People die in hurricanes, but no one executes the weather forecasters. Life is dangerous. People die. So what?

Rockwell puts four stacked pallets in front of the cage door.

Truth. There is no one truth. Everyone has his own truth. It's all about point of view. The way this guy yammers about truth, maybe he's some raving nut case, some true-believing crusader. If that's what he is, then this isn't psychological warfare, after all. This is a shit storm, a *firestorm* about to happen, and Danny Doyle is part of the fuel. You can't reason with a self-righteous lunatic, whether he believes in truth or that space aliens run the world. Danny shouts at him, and because the forklift is an electric vehicle, he is easily able to make himself heard. "Okay, all right, what do you want to know?"

Rockwell stops the machine and dismounts and comes to the cage.

"You set the fire in that bookstore?"

If Danny can get out of the cage, he's got a chance to trick this bastard, overpower him. Or have him killed later by someone else and destroy the recording.

"Yeah. You got me. I set the fire. But one of the apartments above was between tenants, and one of the others was occupied by a guy who worked the graveyard shift and wasn't there. And Jeanie Delmont—"

"Regina Belmont," Rockwell corrects.

“Yeah, whatever, she and her kids were supposed to be visiting her sister out of state, but she came home a day early. Who knew? They were in bed. The apartment was dark. How stupid is that? She couldn’t leave a light on?”

“You’ve got an arrangement with an investigator in the fire marshal’s office.”

Danny shrugs as best he can, cuffed to the cage walls. “He’s not a bad guy. Everyone’s got to eat.”

“Nelson Wallace.”

“Who’re you, a damn god or something, you know everything?”

Rockwell says, “Two men, thugs, went to Regina Belmont’s place, terrorized her into stop advocating for a reinvestigation of the bookstore fire. What’re their names?”

Danny smirks to show he isn’t entirely intimidated. “Oh, so there’s something you don’t know, Sherlock?”

“I know their names. I just want to see if you’ll lie.”

“Hey, I’m being contrite here, if you didn’t notice. Reese Dorbit and Hector Diaz.”

“Hired muscle. They ever kill someone for you?”

“What’s that have to do with Jeanie and her kids? Am I supposed to open my whole life back to nursery school?”

“They ever kill someone for you?” Rockwell repeats.

“Cut me some slack, man. Reese and Hector are vipers. When you have to use them, you’re a snake handler—you’re taking a big risk.”

“They ever kill someone for you?”

Okay, so a self-righteous justice warrior like this locoweed isn’t going to see two sides of the story. He’s all about himself, his imagined virtue. He’ll most likely ask the question a thousand times until he gets an answer.

Danny says, “See, when you hire Reese and Hector, you tell them to get the job done with the least violence, but

they're artists, you know, they take pride in their technique, their craft, how they make people shut the fuck up. Sometimes, they have no choice but to go hard. So, yeah, once, maybe even twice, they popped somebody I contracted for, but I never wanted it to go that far. I regret it. I truly do. You think I don't have a heart? I have a heart like you."

Rockwell studies him in silence for a minute, then returns to the forklift. However, Danny scores, probably with the business about having a heart, because Rockwell removes the stack of pallets from in front of the cage door.

"You brought me to the light, man," Danny declares. "I've been in a dark place, I see that now. Time to make it right."

Rockwell puts the key on the floor near the cage door, retrieves the recorder.

"Hey, my man, I can't reach the key."

"It's not for you," Rockwell says as he walks off into the darker part of the vast warehouse. "Goodbye. Have a nice death."

Crucified as he is, though without nails and a cross, Danny Doyle can't turn his head to look back. He listens to the footsteps recede until the snare drum of the rain and the timpani of thunder mask them.

Rockwell seems to have left the warehouse.

Danny needs to pee.

Nameless uses the USB port to load the recording into his laptop. The warehouse has Wi-Fi. He sends the recording to Ace for the voice to be processed and synthesized by Paramimic. Within an hour, calls will be made, and the recipients will be convinced they are talking to Danny Doyle.

12

The windshield wipers are set at their highest speed, but the streets beyond the glass remain blurred, streaming, flushed with molten veins of reflected lightning, as if the city is melting as Nelson Wallace navigates it.

A quarter of the year, the city is wet and windy, and for half the year it's cold and snowy, and it's a mystery why people have wanted to live there for two centuries, other than to be where the money is. Money is a force equal to gravity and magnetism. Nelson has no illusion that money makes the world go round. Without money, the planet would stop rotating on its axis.

Tall and handsome and black, Nelson has put in nine years as a city firefighter and has been working as an investigator in the fire marshal's office for eighteen years. In three years, he will take retirement and move to Belize, where he owns a sweet house on the beach, two rental houses, and a souvenir shop. Belize has a lot of good-looking ladies, both local citizens and tourists, and he always returns from vacation with a smile on his face that crowds his ears. When he's living there full-time, he'll be a Viagra junkie.

As someone who grew up with certain ideals, his work with Danny Doyle sometimes leaves him feeling as though he's sold out, and he endures moments of regret. But those usually occur on sunny days when the air is clean and light sparkles on the water. On nights like this, he feels as though he isn't as self-interested as he ought to be, and that he should already be full-time in Belize.

Bluish light glows in some of the high windows of the warehouse, although one end of the structure lies in darkness. Danny's Lamborghini is parked by an entrance.

The fire maker's call wasn't regarding any problem. Instead, he'd stressed that an unprecedented opportunity awaited, the biggest score ever, about which they needed to consult. Considering that one of Danny's operations resulted in

a gas explosion that demolished most of a failing shopping mall and resulted in a forty-seven-million-dollar insurance claim and a settlement from the gas company, it's hard to imagine how this old warehouse could lead to a much better payday. However, Danny's past successes earn him maximum credibility.

Nelson parks his Honda behind the Lamborghini. The man-size door is unlocked. He hurries through the downpour and enters the warehouse and makes a discovery that alarms him. He has a passport, but he faults himself for not knowing if Belize has an extradition treaty with the United States.

Caged with all his fears and illusions, Danny Edan Doyle has a short list of things he imagines will happen to him at any moment, but none of them involves the sudden appearance of Nelson Wallace.

“What’re you doing here?” he asks, pretty sure he shouldn’t be in the least bit relieved, pretty sure this is a deepening of the catastrophe.

Nelson frowns. “You called me.”

“Shit, I didn’t call you. Does it look like I’m in a position to make phone calls?”

“It was your voice, your caller ID. You called me.”

“I didn’t call you. We’ll figure it out later. Look, the key’s there on the floor. Unlock the door. You got a penknife? Cut these zip ties.”

Nelson picks up the key but scans the mostly empty warehouse, confused and wary. Then he makes an observation. “Hey, you pissed yourself.”

“I *know* I pissed myself. You think I don’t know? We have to get out of here. You’re in this as deep as I am.”

“What’s going on here? Is this some kinky sex thing?”

Danny is exasperated. He figures that he looks like a wall-eyed trout that’s just bitten a hook. Although he has fire in his veins, being cool and looking cool is essential. People want to hang with you, they respect you, if they think you’re cool. It’s easier to get them to do what you want if they think you’re cool. So Danny strives to be cool. He fails. ““Kinky sex thing”? Are you a freaking *idiot*?”

“Rumors are you’re kinky.”

“*Kinky*? This isn’t kinky, Nelson. This is batshit crazy, this is some lunatic thinks he’s the judge, jury, and executioner. *Get me out of here before he comes back.*”

14

Nelson's bewilderment is giving way to fear. This isn't the Danny Doyle whom Nelson knows, not the confident operator and master of fire. This Danny is a stinking loser. This Danny is clearly going down, and if you associate with a guy who's going down, you'll be pulled with him into the undertow.

"I have to catch a plane to Belize," says Nelson, and he throws the key on the floor.

Which is when Reese Dorbit and Hector Diaz arrive, looking like blood-drinking psychopathic versions of the Beagle Boys from those old Uncle Scrooge McDuck comic books that Nelson liked as a kid.

Nelson has his share of street smarts, and he knows some bad people, and among the people he knows are Reese and Hector, though they aren't guys with whom he associates. No one associates with Reese and Hector except those who hire them to commit assault and battery or murder.

By way of greeting, Reese says, "Wallace."

Nelson says, "Dorbit."

Hector says, "Wallace."

Nelson says, "Diaz."

Neither Reese nor Hector says anything to Danny Doyle, as if they're embarrassed for him, but Danny says, "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"You called us," Reese says.

"I didn't call anyone. That sonofabitch called you. Rockwell. Chloroformed me, put me in this cage, and called you."

"Rockwell?" Reese looks puzzled. "I don't know no Rockwell."

“He wanted to know who threatened that scar-faced bitch, that Jeanie Delmont.”

“Regina Belmont?” Nelson says. “The mother of those two rug rats that died in the bookstore fire?”

Hector Diaz has a more urgent question for Danny. “You told him it was us put the arm on that ugly bitch? We done worse than that for you. Lots of times, we done worse. What other shit you tell this guy?”

Equally disturbed by this revelation, Reese Dorbit says, “You do business with us, there ain’t no contract, but there’s for damn sure a nondisclosure clause.”

Danny’s agitation grows. “Well, shit, man, *I didn’t testify in court*. I only told him what he wanted to know, so he’d set me loose and then I could kick his sorry ass.”

“How’d that work out?” Reese asks sarcastically.

Hector says, “You think you know a guy, and then this.”

It’s Reese who shoots Danny Doyle four times, shredding some chicken wire in the process.

15

High on the catwalk, thirty feet off the floor, in the darkness above the cone-shaded hanging lamps that cast pools of light upon the gathered guilty below, Nameless can't be sure what will happen, but he's prepared for almost anything.

He prefers to execute these missions so that the slimeballs mostly erase themselves. Killing even human debris like these guys can take an emotional toll if you do it often enough; but he never shrinks from pulling the trigger when necessary. His compassion is reserved for the innocent.

Reese Dorbit pulls his pistol and fires with so little fanfare that Danny Doyle doesn't have time to scream. The arsonist might not know he's finished until he's dead and has that final out-of-body experience and looks down at his corpse and wonders about the wisdom of his life choices, supposing that such a thing can happen.

Deeply corrupt but not accustomed to offing people directly, Nelson Wallace evidently interprets Reese Dorbit's perhaps impetuous execution of Doyle as only the first killing. Panicked and expecting to be shot, if only because he is witness to the murder of Doyle, Nelson draws a pistol from a belt holster under his jacket and fires three rounds at Reese, point-blank, killing him.

This rash action does not sit well with Hector Diaz. Although his grammar is clumsy, he is physically quick and graceful, and he has his weapon in hand as Nelson Wallace fires the third time. Both Reese and Nelson are spendthrifts with ammunition, but Hector is more prudent. With the distance from muzzle to his target's skull only three feet, he needs just one round to drill through Nelson's brain, providing an exit tunnel for the fire investigator's soul, supposing there is one.

Because it is unlikely that Hector will suffer such remorse as to be driven to suicide, Nameless fires down on him with a

Wilson Combat/Scattergun Technologies 870 smoothbore, which has a pistol-grip solid SpeedFeed IV-S shortened tactical stock. It has been left here by Ace's team. The angle is far from ideal, the catwalk isn't the steadiest shooting platform, and recoil is a problem. However, three twelve-gauge shells fired in about two seconds lay down a lethal hail that even a man of Hector's physical grace can't elude.

Having no fingerprints, he leaves the shotgun on the catwalk.

He exits the warehouse. Drives the department of health truck to within a block of his hotel. Abandons it there. He has no more need of it.

In his suite, he orders a bottle of fine cabernet sauvignon from room service. He's eaten no dinner. Doesn't matter. He has no appetite now.

When the room service waiter brings the wine, Nameless tips him two hundred dollars. He has a habit of extravagant tipping. He does not know why. He's not seeking approval by doing it. He takes a brief pleasure in the delight of the recipient, but his motive is more complex than that; perhaps the answer lies in his unremembered past.

He turns out the lights and sits in an armchair in the living room of the suite, drinking the cabernet by stormlight.

Those four men were responsible for many murders. That is a truth. They lie dead in a warehouse. That is another truth.

Regina Belmont, now with her sister in another state, will think of it as justice. It is not justice. Justice has failed her.

Some might call it vengeance. It is not that, either, because no relative or friend of those four men's victims was involved in targeting them.

He thinks of it as the promise of high technology, which has democratized the search for evidence, so that any first-rate hacker can know what any law-enforcement agency knows if it cares to consider the facts and act on them.

The wine is superb. Wine-making is one of the many arts of humanity that beautify the world.

The first glass provides a small measure of solace. However, as there is no end to the beauty that some can create, so there also is no end to the horrors that others commit. The pounding rain beyond the windows seems relentless, but it will end. Nature's pure, clear rain will end in time; but the violence, the red rain that is the unrelenting evils of the world, is without surcease. Nothing can be done about those evils except reveal them with the light of truth.

By the time he pours a second glass of cabernet, he is able to move on from the recent carnage and turn his mind to the vision that assaulted him the previous evening in this room.

The dimpled little girl, plush-toy rabbit, blue heron, blond waitress, sullen bearded man, arched tower, rain-slicked highway, sliding-colliding-tumbling vehicles . . . and the toy rabbit in the child's severed hand.

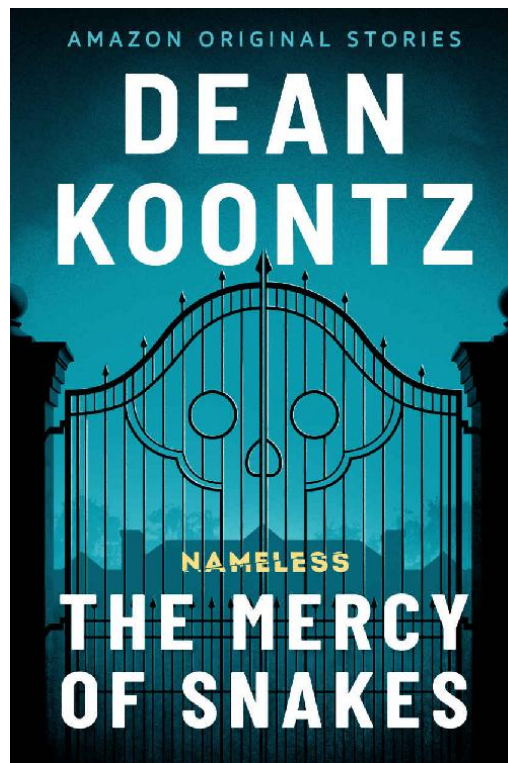
Tomorrow? Next month? Next year?

Or is he wrong to think it's a glimpse into the future? What if these are memories that have escaped the vault of amnesia? What if he knew that child with the floppy-eared rabbit? What if she had been precious to him? What if she had been his daughter?

In vino veritas. They say that in wine there is truth, but this wine, even as fine as it is, can't help him discern either what was or what will be in all of these what-ifs.

Later, when he gets in bed, lies on his back, and rests his head on the pillow, he knows he will be asleep, as always, in one minute. He thinks of Regina Belmont lying awake and tormented by the memory of her children's death. He wonders what would happen if he failed to predetermine a wake-up time. Perhaps he would never wake again. After consideration, he whispers, "*Six o'clock a.m.*"

The story continues . . .



Check out the next episode of Dean Koontz's NAMELESS,
The Mercy of Snakes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dean Koontz is the author of more than a dozen *New York Times* number one bestsellers. His books have sold over five hundred million copies worldwide, and his work is published in thirty-eight languages. He was born and raised in Pennsylvania and lives with his wife, Gerda, and their dog, Elsa, in Southern California.

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