

Mr. Murder

Dean Koontz



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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“Mr. Murder is a superb work by a master of the thriller at the top of his form.”

—The Washington Post Book World

Martin Stillwater has a vivid imagination. It charms his loving wife, delights his two little daughters and gives him all the inspiration he needs to write his highly successful mystery novels. But maybe Martin's imagination is a bit *too* vivid . . . One rainy afternoon, a terrifying incident makes him question his grip on reality. A stranger breaks into his house, accusing Martin of stealing his wife, his children—and his life. Claiming to be the *real* Martin Stillwater, the intruder threatens to take what is rightfully his. The police think he's a figment of Martin's imagination. But Martin and his family have no choice but to believe the stranger's threat. And run for their lives.

But wherever they go—wherever they hide—he finds them. . . .

MR. MURDER

“Koontz is a terrific what-if storyteller . . . the narrative pace is breathless.”

—People

“The resounding variations Mr. Koontz plays on this good story, here craftily retold . . . allow him to counterpoint the new horrors about us with the old horrors already inside us.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Koontz is in fine form . . . dragging the reader along through an intricate series of twists and exciting turns.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“A slam-bang suspense story.” —*Lexington Herald-Leader*

“Koontz engrosses the reader in terror that can almost be touched.” —*San Antonio Express-News*

“Scary and ingenious.” —*The San Jose Mercury News*

“Koontz is the consummate researcher, creating settings, people, and scenes that ring true.” —*Calgary Herald*

“The glue that holds together Koontz's intriguing stories is his stylish writing . . . tight and immensely readable.”

—*The Sunday Denver Post*

“Mr. Murder will leave an indelible imprint on your psyche. Koontz takes us on a wild ride where the outcome is always in doubt, and the final showdown is gripping.”

—*The London Free Press*

“Lean prose and rich characterizations . . . Playing on every emotion and keeping the story racing along, Koontz masterfully escalates the tension . . . with the most ingenious twist ending of his career.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Deliciously frightening. This author manages to put a fresh spin on every novel.” —*The Calgary Sun*

“An exciting, strikingly bizarre thriller.”

—*Lansing State Journal*

“Dean Koontz has always had the uncanny ability to take the most unlikely plot and draw in the reader . . . page after page of twists and turns that keep you guessing.”

—*The Sacramento Bee*

“Wonderfully suspenseful . . . bound to please his legions of fans.” —*The Denver Post*

“Dean Koontz just keeps getting better and better. *Mr. Murder* may be his best novel yet, a seamless exercise in suspense . . . [that] features some of his best characters. The Stillwaters are endearing, and the family is loving but never saccharine or sappy.” —*The Flint Journal*

“Tightly written, brilliantly managed, *Mr. Murder* goes straight to the heart of everyone’s secret fears. As always, Koontz creates solid, three-dimensional characters—he’s especially good with the children here, two endearing, funny little girls who are completely believable.”

—*The Anniston Star*

“Koontz neatly balances terror and mayhem with a marvelous sense of humor and keen insight into human nature, most evident in his well-drawn characterizations of the endearing and resilient Emily and Charlotte. Suspense-packed action and breathless terror.”

—*San Diego Blade-Citizen*

“Koontz paints a vivid portrait of the Stillwater family, the warmest, most lovable collection of people since Charles Dickens’s Cratchit family in *A Christmas Carol*. Koontz knows how to grab a reader’s interest and keep him or her engrossed to the very last page.” —*Orange Coast*

“Terrific visceral energy . . . wonderfully creepy. Koontz nails the reader to the page.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“*Mr. Murder* is a strong and important novel, entertaining and insightful, contemporary and universal.”

—*Mystery Scene*

“Stylish writing, tight and immensely readable.”

—*The Providence Sunday Journal*

“A wonderfully thought-out and suspenseful tale.”

—*The Macon Telegraph*

“A stylish . . . suspenseful tale.” —*Wisconsin State Journal*

“A flat-out entertainment paced at breakneck speed.”

—*Locus*

“*Mr. Murder* is compulsive entertainment, so genuinely conceived and plotted that its readers will be . . . flipping the pages as fast as they can.” —*Mostly Murder*

“A taut and emotive novel . . . a brilliant, twisting climax. *Mr. Murder* is a grand slam of a book. It comes head-on at you from page one, and doesn’t stop.” —*Starburst*

“Koontz has done it again in this first-rate mystery.”

—*The Witchita Falls Times*

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MR. MURDER

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To Phil Parks, for what is often within, and to Don Brautigam, for what is often without. And for both, for having all that talent without any noticeable, annoying neuroses. Well, *hardly* any.

PART ONE

Santa Claus and His Evil Twin

Winter that year was strange and gray. The damp wind smelled of Apocalypse, and morning skies had a peculiar way of slipping cat-quick into midnight.

—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

Life is an unrelenting comedy. Therein lies the tragedy of it.

—*One Dead Bishop, Martin Stillwater*

1

“I need . . .”

Leaning back in his comfortable leather office chair, rocking gently, holding a compact cassette recorder in his right hand and dictating a letter to his editor in New York, Martin Stillwater suddenly realized he was repeating the same two words in a dreamy whisper.

“. . . I need . . . I need . . . I need . . .”

Frowning, Marty clicked off the recorder.

His train of thought had clattered down a siding and chugged to a stop. He could not recall what he had been about to say.

Needed what?

The big house was not merely quiet but eerily still. Paige had taken the kids to lunch and a Saturday matinee movie.

But this childless silence was more than just a condition. It had substance. The air felt heavy with it.

He put one hand to the nape of his neck. His palm was cool and moist. He shivered.

Outside, the autumn day was as hushed as the house, as if all of southern California had been vacated. At the only window of his second-floor study, the wide louvers of the plantation shutters were ajar. Sunlight slanted between angled slats, imprinting the sofa and carpet with narrow red-gold stripes as lustrous as fox fur; the nearest luminous ribbon wrapped one corner of the U-shaped desk.

I need . . .

Instinct told him that something important had happened only a moment ago, just out of his sight, perceived subliminally.

He swiveled his chair and surveyed the room behind him. Other than the fasciae of copper and sunshine interleaved with louver shadows, the only light came from a small desk lamp with a stained glass shade. Even in that gloom, however, he could see he was alone with his books, research files, and computer.

Perhaps the silence seemed unnaturally deep only because the house had been filled with noise and bustle since Wednesday, when the schools had closed for the Thanksgiving holiday. He missed the kids. He should have gone to the movie with them.

I need . . .

The words had been spoken with peculiar tension—and longing.

Now an ominous feeling overcame him, a keen sense of impending danger. It was the premonitory dread which characters sometimes felt in his novels, and which he always struggled to describe without resorting to clichés.

He had not actually experienced anything like it in years, not since Charlotte had been seriously ill when she was four and the doctor had prepared them for the possibility of cancer. All day in the

hospital, as his little girl had been wheeled from one lab to another for tests, all that sleepless night and during the long days that followed before the physicians ventured a diagnosis, Marty felt haunted by a malevolent spirit whose presence thickened the air, making it difficult to breathe, to move, to hope. As it turned out, his daughter had been threatened neither by supernatural malevolence nor malignancy. The problem was a treatable blood disorder. Within three months Charlotte recovered.

But he remembered that oppressive dread too well.

He was in its icy grip again, though for no discernible reason. Charlotte and Emily were healthy, well-adjusted kids. He and Paige were happy together—absurdly happy, considering how many thirty-something couples of their acquaintance were divorced, separated, or cheating on each other. Financially, they were more secure than they had ever expected to be.

Nevertheless, Marty *knew* something was wrong.

He put down the tape recorder, went to the window, and opened the shutters all the way. A leafless sycamore cast stark, elongated shadows across the small side yard. Beyond those gnarled branches, the pale-yellow stucco walls of the house next door appeared to have soaked up the sunshine; gold and russet reflections painted the windows; the place was silent, seemingly serene.

To the right, he could see a section of the street. The houses on the other side of the block were also Mediterranean in style, stucco with clay-tile roofs, gilded by late-afternoon sun, filigreed by overhanging queen-palm fronds. Quiet, well landscaped, planned to the square inch, the neighborhood—and indeed the entire town of Mission Viejo—seemed to be a haven from the chaos that ruled so much of the rest of the world these days.

He closed the shutters, entirely blocking the sun. Apparently the only danger was in his mind, a figment of the same active imagination that had made him, at last, a reasonably successful mystery novelist.

Yet his heart was beating faster than ever.

Marty walked out of his office into the second-floor hall, as far as the head of the stairs. He stood still as the newel post on which he rested one hand.

He wasn't certain what he expected to hear. The soft creak of a door, stealthy footsteps? The furtive rustles and clicks and muffled thumps of an intruder slowly making his way through the house?

Gradually, as he heard nothing suspicious and as his racing heart grew calmer, his sense of impending disaster faded. Anxiety became mere uneasiness.

“Who's there?” he asked, just to break the silence.

The sound of his voice, full of puzzlement, dispelled the portentous mood. Now the hush was only that of an empty house, devoid of menace.

He returned to his office at the end of the hall and settled in the leather chair behind his desk. With the shutters tightly closed and no lamps on except the one with the stained-glass shade, the corners of the room seemed to recede farther than the dimensions of the walls allowed, as if it were a place in a dream.

Because the motif of the lamp shade was fruit, the protective glass on the desk top reflected luminous ovals and circles of cherry-red, plum-purple, grape-green, lemon-yellow, and berry-blue. On its polished metal and Plexiglas surfaces, the cassette recorder, which lay on the glass, also reflected the bright mosaic, glimmering as if encrusted with jewels. When he reached for the recorder, Mar

saw that his hand appeared to be sheathed in the pebbly, iridescent rainbow skin of an exotic lizard.

He hesitated, studying the faux scales on the back of his hand and the phantom jewels on the recorder. Real life was as layered with illusion as any piece of fiction.

He picked up the recorder and pressed the rewind button for a second or two, seeking the last few words of the unfinished letter to his editor. The thin, high-speed whistle-shriek of his voice in reverse issued like an alien language from the small, tinny speaker.

When he thumbed the play button, he found that he had not reversed far enough: “. . . *I need . . . need . . . I need . . .*”

Frowning, he switched the machine to rewind, taking the tape back twice as far as before.

But still: “. . . *I need . . . I need . . .*”

Rewind. Two seconds. Five. Ten. Stop. Play.

“. . . *I need . . . I need . . . I need . . .*”

After two more attempts, he found the letter: “. . . *so I should be able to have the final draft of the new book in your hands in about a month. I think this one is . . . this one is . . . uh . . . this one . . .*”

The dictation stopped. Silence unreeled from the tape—and the sound of his breathing.

By the time the two-word chant finally began to issue from the speaker, Marty had leaned forward tensely on the edge of the chair, frowning at the recorder in his hand.

“. . . *I need . . . I need . . .*”

He checked his watch. Not quite six minutes past four o’clock.

Initially the dreamy murmur was the same as when he’d first come to his senses and heard something chanting like the responses to an interminable, unimaginative religious litany. After about half a minute, however, his voice on the tape changed, became sharp with urgency, swelled with anguish, then with anger.

“. . . *I NEED . . . I NEED . . . I NEED . . .*”

Frustration seethed through those two words.

The Marty Stillwater on the tape—who might as well have been a total stranger to the listening Marty Stillwater—sounded in acute emotional pain for want of something that he could neither describe nor imagine.

Mesmerized, he scowled at the notched white spools of the cassette player turning relentlessly behind the plastic view window.

Finally the voice fell silent, the recording ended, and Marty consulted his watch again. More than twelve minutes past four.

He had assumed that he’d lost his concentration for only a few seconds, slipped into a brief daydream. Instead, he’d sat with the recorder gripped in his hand, the letter to his editor forgotten, repeating those two words for seven minutes or longer.

Seven minutes, for God’s sake.

And he had remembered none of it. As if in a trance.

Now he stopped the tape. His hand was trembling, and when he put the cassette recorder on the desk, it rattled against the glass.

He looked around the office, where he had passed so many solitary hours in the concoction and solution of so many mysteries, where he had put uncounted characters through enormous travail and challenged them to find their way out of mortal danger. The room was so familiar: the overflowing bookshelves, a dozen original paintings that had been featured on the dust jackets of his novels, the couch that he had bought in anticipation of lazy plotting sessions but on which he had never had the time or inclination to lie, the computer with its oversize monitor.

But that familiarity was not comforting anymore, because now it was tainted by the strangeness of what had happened minutes ago.

He blotted his damp palms on his jeans.

Having briefly lifted from him, dread settled again in the manner of Poe's mysterious raven perching above a chamber door.

Waking from the trance, perceiving danger, he had expected to find the threat outside in the street or in the form of a burglar roaming through the rooms below. But it was worse than that. The threat was not external. Somehow, the wrongness was within him.

2

The night is deep and free of turbulence.

Below, the clotted clouds are silver with reflected moonlight, and for a while the shadow of the plane undulates across that vaporous sea.

The killer's flight from Boston arrives on time in Kansas City, Missouri. He goes directly to the baggage-claim area. Thanksgiving-holiday travelers will not head home until tomorrow, so the airport is quiet. His two pieces of luggage—one of which contains a Heckler & Koch P7 pistol, detachable silencer, and expanded magazines loaded with 9mm ammunition—are first and second to drop on the carousel.

At the rental-agency counter he discovers that his reservation has not been misplaced or misrecorded, as often happens. He will receive the large Ford sedan that he requested, instead of being stuck with a subcompact.

The credit card in the name of John Larrington is accepted by the clerk and by the American Express verifying machine with no problem, although his name is not John Larrington.

When he receives the car, it runs well and smells clean. The heater actually works.

Everything seems to be going his way.

Within a few miles of the airport he checks into a pleasant if anonymous four-story motor hotel where the red-haired clerk at the reception counter tells him that he may have a complimentary breakfast—pastries, juice, and coffee—delivered in the morning simply by requesting it. His Visa card in the name of Thomas E. Jukovic is accepted, although Thomas E. Jukovic is not his name.

His room has burnt-orange carpet and striped blue wallpaper. However, the mattress is firm, and the towels are fluffy.

The suitcase containing the automatic pistol and ammunition remains locked in the trunk of the car where it will offer no temptation to snooping motel employees.

After sitting in a chair by the window for a while, staring at Kansas City by starlight, he goes down to the coffee shop to have dinner. He is six feet tall, weighs a hundred and eighty pounds, but eats heartily as a much larger man. A bowl of vegetable soup with garlic toast. Two cheeseburgers, french fries. A slice of apple pie with vanilla ice cream. Half a dozen cups of coffee.

He always has a big appetite. Often he is ravenous; at times his hunger seems almost insatiable.

While he eats, the waitress stops by twice to ask if the food is prepared well and if he needs anything else. She is not merely attentive but flirting with him.

Although he is reasonably attractive, his looks don't rival those of any movie star. Yet women flirt with him more frequently than with other men who are handsomer and better dressed than he. Consisting of Rockport walking shoes, khaki slacks, a dark-green crew-neck sweater, no jewelry, and an inexpensive wristwatch, his wardrobe is unremarkable, unmemorable. Which is the idea. The waitress has no reason to mistake him for a man of means. Yet here she is again, smiling coquettishly.

Once, in a Miami cocktail lounge where he had picked her up, a blonde with whiskey-colored eyes had assured him that an intriguing aura surrounded him. A compelling magnetism arose, she said, from his preference for silence and from the stony expression that usually occupied his face. "You are," she'd insisted playfully, "the epitome of the strong silent type. Hell, if you were in a movie with Clint Eastwood and Stallone, there wouldn't be any dialogue at all!"

Later he had beaten her to death.

He had not been angered by anything she'd said or done. In fact, sex with her had been satisfying.

But he had been in Florida to blow the brains out of a man named Parker Abbotson, and he'd been concerned that the woman might somehow later connect him with the assassination. He hadn't wanted her to be able to give the police a description of him.

After wasting her, he had gone to see the latest Spielberg picture, and then a Steve Martin flick.

He likes movies. Aside from his work, movies are the only life he has. Sometimes it seems his real home is a succession of movie theaters in different cities yet so alike in their shopping-center multiplexity that they might as well be the same dark auditorium.

Now he pretends to be unaware that the coffee-shop waitress is interested in him. She is pretty enough, but he wouldn't dare kill an employee of the restaurant in the very motel where he's staying. He needs to find a woman in a place to which he has no connections.

He tips precisely fifteen percent because either stinginess or extravagance is a sure way to be remembered.

After returning briefly to his room for a wool-lined leather jacket suitable to the late-November night, he gets in the rental Ford and drives in steadily widening circles through the surrounding commercial district. He is searching for the kind of establishment in which he will have a chance to find the right woman.

3

Daddy wasn't Daddy.

He had Daddy's blue eyes, Daddy's dark brown hair, Daddy's too-big ears, Daddy's freckled nose

he was a dead-ringer for the Martin Stillwater pictured on the dust jackets of his books. He sounded just like Daddy when Charlotte and Emily and their mother came home and found him in the kitchen drinking coffee, because he said, “There’s no use pretending you went shopping at the mall after the movie. I had you followed by a private detective. I know you were at a poker parlor in Garden City gambling and smoking cigars.” He stood, sat, and moved like Daddy.

Later, when they went out to Islands for dinner, he even drove like Daddy. Which was too fast according to Mom. Or simply “the confident, skillful technique of a master motorman” if you saw things Daddy’s way.

But Charlotte knew something was wrong, and she fretted.

Oh, he hadn’t been taken over by an alien who crawled out of a big seed pod from outer space or anything so extreme. He wasn’t *that* different from the Daddy she knew and loved.

Mostly, the differences were minor. Though usually relaxed and easy-going, he was slightly tense. He held himself stiffly, as if balancing eggs on his head . . . or as if maybe he expected to be hit at any moment by someone, something. He didn’t smile as quickly or as often as usual, and when he *did* smile, he seemed to be pretending.

Before he backed the car out of the driveway, he turned and checked on Charlotte and Emily to be sure they were using seatbelts, but he didn’t say “the Stillwater rocket to Mars is about to blast off” or “if I take the turns too fast and you have to puke, please throw up neatly in your jacket pockets, not on my nice upholstery” or “if we build up enough speed to go back in time, don’t shout insults at the dinosaurs” or any of the other silly things he usually said.

Charlotte noticed and was troubled.

The restaurant, Islands, had good burgers, great fries—which could be ordered well-done—salads, and soft tacos. Sandwiches and french fries were served in baskets, and the ambiance was Caribbean.

“Ambiance” was a new word for Charlotte. She liked the sound of it so much, she used it every chance she got—though Emily, hopeless child, was always confused and said “what ambulance, don’t see an ambulance” every time Charlotte used it. Seven-year-olds could be such a tribulation. Charlotte was ten—or would be in six weeks—and Emily had *just* turned seven in October. Em was a good sister, but of course seven-year-olds were so . . . so *sevenish*.

Anyway, the ambiance was tropical: bright colors, bamboo on the ceiling, wooden blinds, and lots of potted palms. Both the boy and girl waitresses wore shorts and bright Hawaiian-type shirts.

The place reminded her of Jimmy Buffet music, which was one of those things her parents loved but which Charlotte didn’t get at all. At least the ambiance *was* cool, and the french fries were the best.

They sat in a booth in the non-smoking section, where the ambiance was even nicer. Her parents ordered Corona, which came in frosted mugs. Charlotte had a Coke, and Emily ordered root beer.

“Root beer is a grown-up drink,” Em said. She pointed to Charlotte’s Coke. “When are you going to stop drinking kid stuff?”

Em was convinced that root beer could be as intoxicating as real beer. Sometimes she pretended to be smashed after two glasses, which was stupid and embarrassing. When Em was doing her weaving burping-drunk routine and strangers turned to stare, Charlotte explained that Em was seven. Everyone was understanding—from a seven-year-old, what else could be expected?—but it was embarrassing nonetheless.

By the time the waitress brought dinner, Mom and Daddy were talking about some people they knew who were getting a divorce—boring adult talk that could ruin an ambiance fast if you paid attention. And Em was stacking french fries in peculiar piles, like miniature versions of modern sculptures they'd seen in a museum last summer; she was absorbed by the project.

With everyone distracted, Charlotte unzipped the deepest pocket on her denim jacket, withdrew Fred, and put him on the table.

He sat motionless under his shell, stumpy legs tucked in, headless, as big around as a man's wristwatch. Finally his beaky little nose appeared. He sniffed the air cautiously, and then he stretched his head out of the fortress that he carried on his back. His dark shiny turtle eyes regarded his new surroundings with great interest, and Charlotte figured he must be amazed by the ambiance.

"Stick with me, Fred, and I'll show you places no turtle has ever before seen," she whispered.

She glanced at her parents. They were still so involved with each other that they had not noticed when she'd slipped Fred out of her pocket. Now he was hidden from them by a basket of french fries.

In addition to fries, Charlotte was eating soft tacos stuffed with chicken, from which she extracted a ribbon of lettuce. The turtle sniffed it, turned his head away in disgust. She tried chopped tomato. *Are you serious?* he seemed to say, refusing the tidbit.

Occasionally, Fred could be moody and difficult. That was her fault, she supposed, because she had spoiled him.

She didn't think chicken or cheese would be good for him, and she was not going to offer him any tortilla crumbs until he ate his vegetables, so she nibbled on the crisp french fries and gazed around the restaurant as if fascinated by the other customers, ignoring the rude little reptile. He had rejected the lettuce and tomato merely to annoy her. If he thought she didn't give a hoot whether he ate or not, then he would probably eat. In turtle years, Fred was seven.

She actually became interested in a heavy-metal couple with leather clothes and strange hair. They distracted her for a few minutes, and she was startled by her mother's soft squeak of alarm.

"Oh," said her mother after she squeaked, "it's only Fred."

The ungrateful turtle—after all, Charlotte could have left him at home—was not beside her plate where he'd been left. He had crawled around the basket of fries to the other side of the table.

"I only got him out to feed him," Charlotte said defensively.

Lifting the basket so Charlotte could see the turtle, Mom said, "Honey, it's not good for him to be in your pocket all day."

"Not all day." Charlotte took possession of Fred and returned him to her pocket. "Just since we left the house for dinner."

Mom frowned. "What other livestock do you have with you?"

"Just Fred."

"What about Bob?" Mom asked.

"Oh, yuch," Emily said, making a face at Charlotte. "You got Bob in your pocket? I hate Bob."

Bob was a bug, a slow-moving black beetle as large as the last joint of Daddy's thumb, with faint blue markings on his carapace. She kept him in a big jar at home, but sometimes she liked to take him out and watch him crawl in his laborious way across a countertop or even over the back of her hand.

“I’d never bring Bob to a restaurant,” Charlotte assured them.

“You also know better than to bring Fred,” her mother said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Charlotte said, genuinely embarrassed.

“Dumb,” Emily advised her.

To Emily, Mom said, “No dumber than using french fries as if they’re Lego blocks.”

“I’m making art.” Emily was always making art. She was weird sometimes even for a seven-year-old. *Picasso reincarnate*, Daddy called her.

“Art, huh?” Mom said. “You’re making art out of your food, so then what are you going to eat? . . . painting?”

“Maybe,” Em said. “A painting of a chocolate cake.”

Charlotte zipped shut her jacket pocket, imprisoning Fred.

“Wash your hands before you go on eating,” Daddy said.

Charlotte said, “Why?”

“What were you just handling?”

“You mean Fred? But Fred’s clean.”

“I said, wash your hands.”

Her father’s snappishness reminded Charlotte that he was not himself. He rarely spoke harshly to her or Em. She behaved not out of fear that he’d spank her or shout at her, but because it was important not to disappoint him or Mom. It was the best feeling in the world when she got a good grade in school or performed well at a piano recital and made them proud of her. And absolutely nothing was worse than messing up—and seeing a sad look of disappointment in their eyes, even when they didn’t punish her or say anything.

The sharpness of her father’s voice sent her directly to the ladies’ room, blinking back tears every step of the way.

Later, on the way home from Islands, when Daddy got a lead foot, Mom said, “Marty, this isn’t the Indianapolis Five Hundred.”

“You think this is fast?” Daddy asked, as if astonished. “This isn’t fast.”

“Even the caped crusader himself can’t get the Batmobile up to speeds like this.”

“I’m thirty-three, never had an accident. Spotless record. No tickets. Never been stopped by a cop.”

“Because they can’t catch you,” Mom said.

“Exactly.”

In the back seat, Charlotte and Emily grinned at each other.

For as long as Charlotte could remember, her parents had been having jokey conversations about her driving, though her mother was serious about wanting her to go slower.

“I’ve never even had a parking ticket,” Daddy said.

“Well, of course, it’s not easy to get a parking ticket when the speedometer needle is always pegged out.”

In the past their back-and-forth had always been good-humored. But now, he suddenly spok

sharply to Mom: “For God’s sake, Paige, I’m a good driver, this is a safe car, I spent more money on than I should have precisely because it’s one of the safest cars on the road, so will you just give this rest?”

“Sure. Sorry,” Mom said.

Charlotte looked at her sister. Em was wide-eyed with disbelief.

Daddy was not Daddy. Something was wrong. Big-time wrong.

They had gone only a block before he slowed down and glanced at Mom and said, “Sorry.”

“No, you were right, I’m too much of a worrier about some things,” Mom told him.

They smiled at each other. It was all right. They weren’t going to get divorced like those people they’d been talking about at dinner. Charlotte couldn’t recall them ever being angry with each other for longer than a few minutes.

However, she was still worried. Maybe she *should* check around the house and outside behind the garage to see if she could find a giant empty seed pod from outer space.

4

Like a shark cruising cold currents in a night sea, the killer drives.

This is his first time in Kansas City, but he knows the streets. Total mastery of the layout is part of his preparation for every assignment, in case he becomes the subject of a police pursuit and needs to make a hasty escape under pressure.

Curiously, he has no recollection of having seen—let alone studied—a map, and he can’t imagine from where this highly detailed information was acquired. But he doesn’t like to consider the holes in his memory because thinking about them opens the door on a black abyss that terrifies him.

So he just drives.

Usually he likes to drive. Having a powerful and responsive machine at his command gives him a sense of control and purpose.

But once in a while, as happens now, the motion of the car and the sights of a strange city—regardless of how familiar he may be with the layout of its streets—make him feel small, alone, adrift. His heart begins to beat fast. His palms are suddenly so damp, the steering wheel slips through them.

Then, as he brakes at a traffic light, he looks at the car in the lane beside him and sees a family revealed by the street lamps. The father is driving. The mother sits in the passenger seat, an attractive woman. A boy of about ten and a girl of six or seven are in the back seat. On their way home from a night out. Maybe a movie. Talking, laughing, parents and children together, sharing.

In his deteriorating condition, that sight is a merciless hammer blow, and he makes a thin wordless sound of anguish.

He pulls off the street, into the parking lot of an Italian restaurant. Slumps in his seat. Breathes quick shallow gasps.

The emptiness. He dreads the emptiness.

And now it is upon him.

He feels as if he is a hollow man, made of the thinnest blown glass, fragile, only slightly more substantial than a ghost.

At times like this, he desperately needs a mirror. His reflection is one of the few things that can confirm his existence.

The restaurant's elaborate red and green neon sign illuminates the interior of the Ford. When he tilts the rearview mirror to look at himself, his skin has a cadaverous cast, and his eyes are alight with changing crimson shapes, as if fires burn within him.

Tonight, his reflection is not enough to diminish his agitation. He feels less substantial by the moment. Perhaps he will breathe out one last time, expelling the final thin substance of himself in the exhalation.

Tears blur his vision. He is overwhelmed by his loneliness, and tortured by the meaninglessness of his life.

He folds his arms across his chest, hugs himself, leans forward, and rests his forehead against the steering wheel. He sobs as if he is a small child.

He doesn't know his name, only the names he will use while in Kansas City. He wants so much to have a name of his own that is not as counterfeit as the credit cards on which it appears. He has no family, no friends, no home. He cannot recall who gave him this assignment—or any of the jobs before it—and he doesn't know why his targets must die. Incredibly, he has no idea who pays him; he does not remember where he got the money in his wallet or where he bought the clothes he wears.

On a more profound level, he does not know *who* he is. He has no memory of a time when his profession was anything other than murder. He has no politics, no religion, no personal philosophy whatsoever. Whenever he tries to take an interest in current affairs, he finds himself unable to retain what he reads in the newspapers; he can't even focus his attention on television news. He is intelligent, yet he permits himself—or is permitted—only satisfactions of a physical nature: food, sex, the savage exhilaration of homicide. Vast regions of his mind remain uncharted.

A few minutes pass in green and red neon.

His tears dry. Gradually he stops trembling.

He will be all right. Back on the rails. Steady, controlled.

In fact he ascends with remarkable speed from the depths of despair. Surprising, how readily he is willing to continue with his latest assignment—and with the mere shadow of a life that he leads. Sometimes it seems to him that he operates as if programmed in the manner of a dumb and obedient machine.

On the other hand, if he were not to continue, what else would he do? This shadow of a life is the only life he has.

5

While the girls were upstairs, brushing their teeth and preparing for bed, Marty methodically went from room to room on the first floor, making sure all of the doors and windows were locked.

He had circled half the downstairs—and was testing the latch on the window above the kitchen sink

—before he realized what a peculiar task he had set for himself. Prior to turning in every night, he checked the front and back doors, of course, plus the sliding doors between the family room and patio, but he did not ordinarily verify that any particular window was secure unless he knew that it had been open for ventilation during the day. Nevertheless, he was confirming the integrity of the house's perimeter as conscientiously as a sentry might certify the outer defenses of a fortress besieged by enemies.

As he was finishing in the kitchen, he heard Paige enter, and a moment later she slid both arms around his waist, embracing him from behind. “You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, well . . .”

“Bad day?”

“Not really. Just one bad moment.”

Marty turned in her arms to embrace her. She felt wonderful, so warm and strong, so *alive*.

That he loved her more now than when they had met in college was no surprise. The triumphs and failures they had shared, the years of daily struggle to make a place in the world and to seek the meaning of it, was rich soil in which love could grow.

However, in an age when ideal beauty was supposedly embodied in nineteen-year-old professional cheerleaders for major-league football teams, Marty knew a lot of guys who would be surprised to hear he'd found his wife increasingly attractive as she had aged from nineteen to thirty-three. Her eyes were no bluer than they had been when he'd first met her, her hair was not a richer shade of gold, and her skin was neither smoother nor more supple. Nevertheless, experience had given her character depth. Corny as it sounded in this era of knee-jerk cynicism, she sometimes seemed to shine with an inner light, as radiant as the venerated subject of a painting by Raphael.

So, yeah, maybe he had a heart as soft as butter, maybe he was a sucker for romance, but he found her smile and the challenge of her eyes infinitely more exciting than a six-pack of naked cheerleaders.

He kissed her brow.

She said, “One bad moment? What happened?”

He hadn't decided how much he should tell her about those seven lost minutes. For now it might be best to minimize the deep weirdness of the experience, see the doctor Monday morning, and even have some tests done. If he was in good health, what had happened in the office this afternoon might prove to be an inexplicable singularity. He didn't want to alarm Paige unnecessarily.

“Well?” she persisted.

With the inflection she gave that single word, she reminded him that twelve years of marriage forbade serious secrets, no matter what good intentions motivated his reticence.

He said, “You remember Audrey Aimes?”

“Who? Oh, you mean in *One Dead Bishop*?”

One Dead Bishop was a novel he had written. Audrey Aimes was the lead character.

“Remember what her problem was?” he asked.

“She found a dead priest hanging on a hook in her foyer closet.”

“Aside from that.”

“She had *another* problem? Seems like a dead priest is enough. Are you sure you're not over-

complicating your plots?"

"I'm serious," he said, though aware of how odd it was that he should choose to inform his wife of a personal crisis by comparing it to the experiences of a mystery-novel heroine whom *he* had created.

Was the dividing line between life and fiction as hazy for other people as it sometimes was for a writer? And if so—was there a book in that idea?

Frowning, Paige said, "Audrey Aimes . . . Oh, yeah, you're talking about her blackouts."

"Fugues," he said.

A fugue was a serious personality dissociation. The victim went places, talked to people, and engaged in varied activities while appearing normal—yet later could not recall where he had been or what he had done during the blackout, as if the time had passed in deepest sleep. A fugue could last minutes, hours, or even days.

Audrey Aimes had suddenly begun to suffer from fugues when she was thirty, because repressed memories of childhood abuse had begun to surface after more than two decades, and she had retreated from them psychologically. She'd been certain she'd killed the priest while in a fugue state, although of course someone else had murdered him and stuffed him in her closet, and the entire bizarre homicide was connected to what had happened to her when she was a little girl.

In spite of being able to earn a living by spinning elaborate fantasies out of thin air, Marty had a reputation for being as emotionally stable as the Rock of Gibraltar and as easy-going as a golden retriever on Valium, which was probably why Paige still smiled at him and appeared reluctant to take him seriously.

She stood on her toes, kissed his nose, and said, "So you forgot to take out the garbage, and now you're going to claim it's because you're suffering a personality breakdown due to long-forgotten hideous abuses when you were six years old. Really, Marty. Shame on you. Your mom and dad are the sweetest people I've ever met."

He let go of her, closed his eyes, and pressed one hand against his forehead. He was developing a fierce headache.

"I'm serious, Paige. This afternoon, in the office . . . for seven minutes . . . well, I only know what the hell I was doing during that time because I've got it on a tape recorder. I don't remember any of it. And it's creepy. Seven creepy minutes."

He felt her body tense against his, as she realized that he was not engaged in some complex joke. And when he opened his eyes, he saw that her playful smile was gone.

"Maybe there's a simple explanation," he said. "Maybe there's no reason to be concerned. But I'm scared, Paige. I feel stupid, like I should just shrug and forget about it, but I'm scared."

6

In Kansas City, a chill wind polishes the night until the sky seems to be an infinite slab of clear crystal in which stars are suspended and behind which is pent a vast reservoir of darkness.

Beneath that enormous weight of space and blackness, the Blue Life Lounge huddles like a research station on the floor of an ocean trench, pressurized to resist implosion. The facade is covered in

shiny aluminum skin reminiscent of Airstream travel trailers and roadside diners from the 1950s. Blue and green neon spells the name in lazy script and outlines the structure, glimmering in the aluminum and beckoning with as much allure as the lamps of Neptune.

Inside, where an amplified combo blasts out rock-'n'-roll from the past two decades, the killer moves toward the huge horseshoe bar in the center of the room. The air is thick with cigarette smoke, beer fumes, and body heat; it almost resists him, as if it's water.

The crowd offers radically different images from the traditional Thanksgiving scenes flooding television screens during this holiday weekend. At the tables the customers are mostly raucous young men in groups with too much energy and testosterone for their own good. They shout to be heard above the thundering music, grab at waitresses to get their attention, whoop in approval when the guitarist gets off a good riff.

Their determination to enjoy themselves has the frantic quality of insectile frenzy.

A third of the men at the tables are accompanied by young wives or girlfriends of the big-hair and heavy-makeup persuasion. They are as rowdy as the men—and would be as out of place at a hearthside family gathering as screeching bright-plumed parrots would be out of place at the bedside of a dying nun.

The horseshoe-shaped bar encircles an oval stage, bathed in red and white spotlights, where two young women with exceptionally firm bodies thrash to the music and call it dancing. They wear cowgirl costumes designed to tease, all fringe and spangles, and one of them elicits whistles and hoots when she removes her halter top.

The men on the bar stools are all ages and, unlike the customers at the tables, each appears to be alone. They sit in silence, staring up at the two smooth-skinned dancers. Many sway slightly on the stools or move their heads dreamily from side to side in time to some other music far less driving than the tunes the band is actually playing; they are like a colony of sea anemones, stirred by slow deep currents, waiting dumbly for a morsel of pleasure to drift to them.

He sits on one of only two empty stools and orders a bottle of Beck's dark from a bartender who could crack walnuts in the crooks of his arms. All three bartenders are tall and muscular, no doubt hired for their ability to double as bouncers if the need arises.

The dancer at the far end of the stage, the one whose breasts bounce unfettered, is a striking brunette with a thousand-watt smile. She is into the music and genuinely seems to enjoy performing.

Although the nearest dancer, a leggy blonde, is even more attractive than the brunette, her routine is mechanical, and she seems to be numbed either by drugs or disgust. She neither smiles nor looks at anyone, but gazes at some far place only she can see.

She seems haughty, disdainful of the men who stare at her, the killer included. He would derive a lot of pleasure from drawing his pistol and pumping several rounds into her exquisite body—one fine good measure in the center of her pouting face.

An intense thrill shakes him at the mere contemplation of taking her beauty from her. The theft of her beauty appeals to him more than taking her life. He places little value on life but a great deal on beauty because his own life is often unbearably bleak.

Fortunately, the pistol is in the trunk of the rented Ford. He has left the gun in the car precisely to avoid a temptation like this, when he feels compelled toward violence.

As often as two or three times a day, he is gripped by a desire to destroy anyone who happens to be

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