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DEAN KOONTZ



what
the night
knows

[A NOVEL]

NOVELS BY DEAN KOONTZ

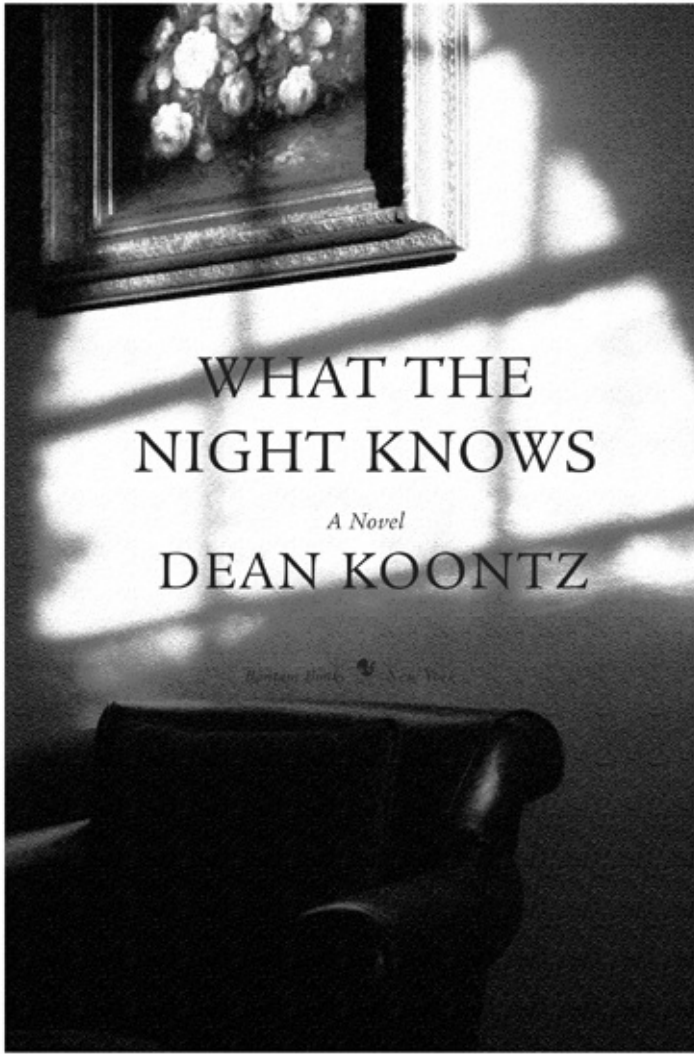
Breathless • Relentless • Your Heart Belongs to Me • The Darkest Evening of the Year • The Good Guy • The Husband • Velocity • Life Expectancy • The Taking • The Face • By the Light of the Moon • One Door Away from Heaven • From the Corner of His Eye • False Memory • Seize the Night • Feels Nothing • Mr. Murder • Dragon Tears • Hideaway • Cold Fire • The Bad Place • Midnight • Lightning • Watchers • Strangers • Twilight Eyes • Darkfall • Phantoms • Whispers • The Mask • The Vision • The Face of Fear • Night Chills • Shattered • The Voice of the Night • The Servants of Twilight • The House of Thunder • The Key to Midnight • The Eyes of Darkness • Shadowfires • Winter Moon • The Door to December • Dark Rivers of the Heart • Icebound • Strange Highways • Intensity • Sole Survivor • Ticktock • The Funhouse • Demon Seed

ODD THOMAS

Odd Thomas • Forever Odd • Brother Odd • Odd Hours

FRANKENSTEIN

Prodigal Son • City of Night • Dead and Alive • Lost Souls



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To Gerda,
who has haunted my heart
since the day we met

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

Chapter 49

Chapter 50

About the Author

Death, the undiscovered country,
From whose bourn no traveler returns ...

—SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

WHAT YEAR THESE EVENTS TRANSPIRED IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE. Where they occurred is not important. The time is always, and the place is everywhere.

Suddenly at noon, six days after the murders, birds flew to trees and sheltered roosts. As their wings had lanced the sky, the rain fell close behind their flight. The long afternoon was as dim and drowned as twilight in Atlantis.

The state hospital stood on a hill, silhouetted against a gray and sodden sky. The September light appeared to strop a razor's edge along each skein of rain.

A procession of eighty-foot purple beeches separated the inbound and the outbound lanes of the approach road. Their limbs overhung the car and collected the rain to redistribute it in thick drizzles that rapped against the windshield.

The thump of the wipers matched the slow, heavy rhythm of John Calvino's heart. He did not play the radio. The only sounds were the engine, the windshield wipers, the rain, the swish of tires turning on wet pavement, and a memory of the screams of dying women.

Near the main entrance, he parked illegally under the portico. He propped the POLICE placard on the dashboard.

John was a homicide detective, but this car belonged to him, not to the department. The use of the placard while off duty might be a minor violation of the rules. But his conscience was encrusted with worse transgressions than the abuse of police prerogatives.

At the reception desk in the lobby sat a lean woman with close-cropped black hair. She smelled of the lunchtime cigarettes that had curbed her appetite. Her mouth was as severe as that of an iguana.

After glancing at John's police ID and listening to his request, she used the intercom to call an escort for him. Pen pinched in her thin fingers, white knuckles as sharp as chiseled marble, she printed his name and badge number in the visitors' register.

Hoping for gossip, she wanted to talk about Billy Lucas.

Instead, John went to the nearest window. He stared at the rain without seeing it.

A few minutes later, a massive orderly named Coleman Hanes escorted him to the third-floor top—floor. Hanes so filled the elevator that he seemed like a bull in a narrow stall, waiting for the door to the rodeo ring to be opened. His mahogany skin had a faint sheen, and by contrast his white uniform was radiant.

They talked about the unseasonable weather: the rain, the almost wintry cold two weeks before summer officially ended. They discussed neither murder nor insanity.

John did most of the talking. The orderly was self-possessed to the point of being phlegmatic.

The elevator opened to a vestibule. A pink-faced guard sat at a desk, reading a magazine.

"Are you armed?" he asked.

"My service pistol."

"You'll have to give it to me."

John removed the weapon from his shoulder rig, surrendered it.

On the desk stood a Crestron touch-screen panel. When the guard pressed an icon, the

electronic lock released the door to his left.

Coleman Hanes led the way into what appeared to be an ordinary hospital corridor: gray vinyl tile underfoot, pale-blue walls, white ceiling with fluorescent panels.

“Will he eventually be moved to an open floor or will he be kept under this security permanently?” John asked.

“I’d keep him here forever. But it’s up to the doctors.”

Hanes wore a utility belt in the pouches of which were a small can of Mace, a Taser, plastic-strap handcuffs, and a walkie-talkie.

All the doors were closed. Each featured a lock-release keypad and a porthole.

Seeing John’s interest, Hanes said, “Double-paned. The inner pane is shatterproof. The outer is a two-way mirror. But you’ll be seeing Billy in the consultation room.”

This proved to be a twenty-foot-square chamber divided by a two-foot-high partition. From the top of this low wall to the ceiling were panels of thick armored glass in steel frames.

In each panel, near the sill and just above head height, two rectangular steel grilles allowed sound to pass clearly from one side of the glass to the other.

The nearer portion of the room was the smaller: twenty feet long, perhaps eight feet wide. Two armchairs were angled toward the glass, a small table between them.

The farther portion of the room contained one armchair and a long couch, allowing the patient either to sit or to lie down.

On this side of the glass, the chairs had wooden legs. The back and seat cushions were button-tufted.

Beyond the glass, the furniture featured padded, upholstered legs. The cushions were smooth-sewn, without buttons or upholstery tacks.

Ceiling-mounted cameras on the visitor’s side covered the entire room. From the guard station, Coleman Hanes could watch but not listen.

Before leaving, the orderly indicated an intercom panel in the wall beside the door. “Call me when you’re finished.”

Alone, John stood beside an armchair, waiting.

The glass must have had a nonreflective coating. He could see only the faintest ghost of himself haunting that polished surface.

In the far wall, on the patient’s side of the room, two barred windows provided a view of slashing rain and dark clouds curdled like malignant flesh.

On the left, a door opened, and Billy Lucas entered the patient’s side of the room. He wore slippers, gray cotton pants with an elastic waistband, and a long-sleeved gray T-shirt.

His face, as smooth as cream in a saucer, seemed to be as open and guileless as it was handsome. With pale skin and thick black hair, dressed all in gray, he resembled an Edward Steichen glamour portrait from the 1920s or ’30s.

The only color he offered, the only color on his side of the glass, was the brilliant, limpid, burning blue of his eyes.

Neither agitated nor lethargic from drugs, Billy crossed the room unhurriedly, with straight-shouldered confidence and an almost eerie grace. He looked at John, only at John, from the moment he entered the room until he stood before him, on the farther side of the glass partition.

“You’re not a psychiatrist,” Billy said. His voice was clear, measured, and mellifluous. H

had sung in his church choir. "You're a detective, aren't you?"

"Calvino. Homicide."

"I confessed days ago."

"Yes, I know."

"The evidence proves I did it."

"Yes, it does."

"Then what do you want?"

"To understand."

Less than a full smile, a suggestion of amusement shaped the boy's expression. He was fourteen, the unrepentant murderer of his family, capable of unspeakable cruelty, yet this half-smile made him look neither smug nor evil, but instead wistful and appealing, as though he were recalling a trip to an amusement park or a fine day at the shore.

"Understand?" Billy said. "You mean—what was my motive?"

"You haven't said why."

"The why is easy."

"Then why?"

The boy said, "Ruin."

THE WINDLESS DAY ABRUPTLY BECAME TURBULENT AND RATTLED raindrops like volleys of buckshot against the armored glass of the barred windows.

That cold sound seemed to warm the boy's blue gaze, and his eyes shone now as bright as pilot lights.

" 'Ruin,' " John said. "What does that mean?"

For a moment, Billy Lucas seemed to want to explain, but then he merely shrugged.

"Will you talk to me?" John asked.

"Did you bring me something?"

"You mean a gift? No. Nothing."

"Next time, bring me something."

"What would you like?"

"They won't let me have anything sharp or anything hard and heavy. Paperback books would be okay."

The boy had been an honor student, in his junior year of high school, having skipped two grades.

"What kind of books?" John asked.

"Whatever. I read everything and rewrite it in my mind to make it what I want. In my version, every book ends with everyone dead."

Previously silent, the storm sky found its voice. Billy looked at the ceiling and smiled, as if the thunder spoke specifically to him. Head tilted back, he closed his eyes and stood that way even after the rumble faded.

"Did you plan the murders or was it on impulse?"

Rolling his head from side to side as though he were a blind musician enraptured by music, the boy said, "Oh, Johnny, I planned to kill them long, long ago."

"How long ago?"

"Longer than you would believe, Johnny. Long, long ago."

"Which of them did you kill first?"

"What does it matter if they're all dead?"

"It matters to me," John Calvino said.

Pulses of lightning brightened the windows, and fat beads of rain quivered down the pane, leaving a tracery of arteries that throbbed on the glass with each bright palpitation.

"I killed my mother first, in her wheelchair in the kitchen. She was getting a carton of milk from the refrigerator. She dropped it when the knife went in."

Billy stopped rolling his head, but he continued to face the ceiling, eyes still closed. His mouth hung open. He raised his hands to his chest and slid them slowly down his torso.

He appeared to be in the grip of a quiet ecstasy.

When his hands reached his loins, they lingered, and then slid upward, drawing the T-shirt with them.

"Dad was in the study, at his desk. I clubbed him from behind, twice on the head, then I used the claw end of the hammer. It went through his skull and hooked so deep I couldn't pull it out."

pull it loose.”

Now Billy slipped the T-shirt over his head and down his arms, and he dropped it on the floor.

His eyes remained closed, head tipped back. His hands languidly explored his back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms. He seemed enraptured by the texture of his skin, by the contours of his body.

“Grandma was upstairs in her room, watching TV. Her dentures flew out when I punched her in the face. That made me laugh. I waited till she regained consciousness before I strangled her with a scarf.”

He lowered his head, opened his eyes, and held his pale hands before his face to study them, as if reading the past, rather than the future, in the lines of his palms.

“I went to the kitchen then. I was thirsty. I drank a beer and took the knife out of my mother.”

John Calvino sat on the arm of a chair.

He knew everything the boy told him, except the order of the killings, which Billy had not revealed to the case detectives. The medical examiner had provided a best-guess scenario based on crime-scene evidence, but John needed to know for sure how it had happened.

Still studying his hands, Billy Lucas said, “My sister, Celine, was in her room, listening to bad music. I did her before I killed her. Did you know I did her?”

“Yes.”

Crossing his arms, slowly caressing his biceps, the boy met John’s eyes again.

“Then I stabbed her precisely nine times, though I think the fourth one killed her. I just didn’t want to stop that soon.”

Thunder rolled, torrents of rain beat upon the roof, and faint concussion waves seemed to flutter the air. John felt them shiver through the microscopic cochlear hairs deep in his ears, and he wondered if perhaps they had nothing to do with the storm.

He saw challenge and mockery in the boy’s intense blue eyes. “Why did you say ‘precisely’?”

“Because, Johnny, I didn’t stab her eight times, and I didn’t stab her ten. Precisely nine.”

Billy moved so close to the glass partition that his nose almost touched it. His eyes were pools of threat and hatred, but they seemed at the same time to be desolate wells in the lonely depths of which something had drowned.

The detective and the boy regarded each other for a long time before John said, “Did you ever love them?”

“How could I love them when I hardly knew them?”

“But you’ve known them all your life.”

“I know you better than I knew them.”

A dull but persistent disquiet had compelled John to come to the state hospital. The encounter had sharpened it.

He rose from the arm of the chair.

“You’re not going already?” Billy asked.

“Do you have something more to tell me?”

The boy chewed his lower lip.

John waited until waiting seemed pointless, and then he started toward the door.

“*Wait. Please,*” the boy said, his quivering voice different from what it had been before.

Turning, John saw a face transformed by anguish and eyes bright with desperation.

“Help me,” the boy said. “Only you can.”

Returning to the glass partition, John said, “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t do anything for you now. No one can.”

“But you know. You *know*.”

“What do you think I know?”

For a moment more, Billy Lucas appeared to be a frightened child, unsettled and uncertain. But then triumph glittered in his eyes.

His right hand slid down his flat abdomen and under the elastic waist of his gray cotton pants. He jerked down the pants with his left hand, and with his right directed his urine into the lower grille in the glass panel.

As the stinking stream splattered through the steel grid, John danced backward, out of range. Never had urine smelled so rank or looked so dark, as yellow-brown as the juice of spoiled fruit.

Aware that his target had safely retreated, Billy Lucas aimed higher, hosing the glass left to right, right to left. Seen through the foul and rippling flux, the boy’s facial features melted and he seemed about to dematerialize, as if he had been only an apparition.

John Calvino pressed the button on the intercom panel beside the door and said to Coleman Hanes, “I’m finished here.”

To escape the sulfurous odor of the urine, he didn’t wait for the orderly but instead stepped into the hallway.

Behind John, the boy called out, “You should have brought me something. You should have made an offering.”

The detective closed the door and looked down at his shoes in the fluorescent glare of the corridor. Not one drop of foulness marred their shine.

As the door to the guard’s vestibule opened, John walked toward it, toward Coleman Hanes, whose size and presence gave him the almost mythological aura of one who battles giants and dragons.

ON THE SECOND FLOOR, ONE DOWN FROM BILLY LUCAS, THE hospital-staff lounge featured an array of vending machines, a bulletin board, blue molded-plastic chairs, and Formica tables the color of flesh.

John Calvino and Coleman Hanes sat at one of the tables and drank coffee from paper cups. In the detective's coffee floated a blind white eye, a reflection of a can light overhead.

"The stench and the darkness of the urine are related to his regimen of medications," Hanes explained. "But he's never done anything like that before."

"Maybe you better hope it's not his new preferred form of self-expression."

"We don't take chances with bodily fluids since HIV. If he does that again, we'll restrain and catheterize him for a few days and let him decide whether he'd rather have a little freedom of movement."

"Won't that bring lawyers down on you?"

"Sure. But once he's pissed on *them*, they won't see it as a civil right anymore."

John glimpsed something on the orderly's right palm that he had not noticed previously: red, blue, and black tattoo, the eagle-globe-and-anchor emblem of the United States Marine Corps.

"You serve over there?"

"Two tours."

"Hard duty."

Hanes shrugged. "That whole country's a mental hospital, just a lot bigger than this place."

"In your view, does Billy Lucas belong in a mental hospital?"

The orderly's smile was as thin as a filleting knife. "You think he should be in an orphanage?"

"I'm just trying to understand him. He's too young for adult prison, too dangerous for any youth correctional facility. So maybe he's here because there was nowhere else to put him. Do you think he's insane ... ?"

Hanes finished his coffee. He crushed the paper cup in his fist. "If he's not insane, what's wrong with him?"

"That's what I'm asking."

"I thought you had the answer. I thought I heard an implied *or* at the end of the question."

"Nothing implied," John assured him.

"If he's not insane, his actions are. If he's something other than insane, it's a distinction without a difference." He tossed the crumpled cup at a wastebasket, and scored. "I thought the case was closed. What did they send you here for?"

John didn't intend to reveal that he had never been assigned to the case. "Was the boy given my name before he met me?"

Hanes shook his head slowly, and John thought of a tank turret coming to bear on a target. "No. I told him he had a visitor he was required to see. I once had a sister, John. She was raped, murdered. I don't give Billy's kind any more than I have to."

"Your sister—how long ago?"

"Twenty-two years. But it's like yesterday."

"It always is," John said.

The orderly fished his wallet from a hip pocket and flipped directly to the cellophane sleeve in which he kept a photo of his lost sister. "Angela Denise."

"She was lovely. How old is she there?"

"Seventeen. Same age as when she was killed."

"Did they convict someone?"

"He's in one of the new prisons. Private cell. Has his own TV. They can get their own TV these days. And conjugal visits. Who knows what else they get."

Hanes put away his wallet, but he would never be able to put away the memory of his sister. Now that John Calvino knew about the sister, he read Hanes's demeanor as less phlegmatic than melancholy.

"I told Billy I was Detective Calvino. I never mentioned my first name. But the kid called me Johnny. Made a point of it."

"Karen Eisler at the reception desk—she saw your ID. But she couldn't have told Luca. There's no phone in his room."

"Is there any other explanation?"

"Maybe I lied to you."

"That's one possibility I won't waste time considering." John hesitated. Then: "Coleman. I'm not sure how to ask this."

Hanes waited, as still as sculpture. He never fidgeted. He never made a sweeping gesture when a raised eyebrow would do as well.

John said, "I know he was transferred here only four days ago. But is there anything you've noticed he does that's ... strange?"

"Besides trying to pee on you?"

"Not that it happens to me all the time, but that isn't what I mean by strange. I expect him to be aggressive one way or another. What I'm looking for is ... anything quirky."

Hanes considered, then said, "Sometimes he talks to himself."

"Most of us do, a little."

"Not in the third person."

John leaned forward in his chair. "Tell me."

"Well, I guess it's usually a question. He'll say, 'Isn't it a nice day, Billy?' Or 'This is so warm and cozy, Billy. Isn't it warm and cozy?' The thing he most often asks is if he's having fun."

"Fun? What does he say, exactly?"

" 'Isn't this fun, Billy? Are you having fun, Billy? Could this be any more fun, Billy?' "

John's coffee had gone cold. He pushed the cup aside. "Does he ever answer his own questions aloud?"

Coleman Hanes thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so."

"He doesn't take two sides of a conversation?"

"No. Mostly just asks himself questions. Rhetorical questions. They don't really need an answer. It doesn't sound all that strange, I guess, until you've heard him do it."

John found himself turning his wedding band around and around on his finger. Finally he said, "He told me that he likes books."

"He's allowed paperbacks. We have a little hospital library."

“What kind of thing does he read?”

“I haven’t paid attention.”

“True-crime stories? True-murder?”

Hanes shook his head. “We don’t have any of those. Not a good idea. Patients like Bill find books like that ... too exciting.”

“Has he asked for true-crime books?”

“He’s never asked me. Maybe someone else.”

From a compartment in his ID wallet, John extracted a business card and slid it across the table. “Office number’s on the front. I wrote my home and cell numbers on the back. Call me if anything happens.”

“Like what?”

“Anything unusual. Anything that makes you think of me. Hell, I don’t know.”

Tucking the card in his shirt pocket, Hanes said, “How long you been married?”

“It’ll be fifteen years this December. Why?”

“The whole time we’ve been sitting here, you’ve been turning the ring on your finger, like reassuring yourself it’s there. Like you wouldn’t know what to do without it.”

“Not the whole time,” John said, because he had only a moment earlier become aware of playing with the wedding band.

“Pretty much the whole time,” the orderly insisted.

“Maybe you should be the detective.”

As they rose to their feet, John felt as if he wore an iron yoke. Coleman had a burden, too. John flattered himself to think he carried his weight with a grace that matched that of the orderly.

THE ENGINE OBEYED THE KEY AND TURNED OVER SMOOTHLY, but then a hard thump shuddered the Ford. Startled, John Calvino glanced at the rearview mirror to see what had collided with the back bumper. No vehicle occupied the driveway behind him.

Still under the hospital portico, leaving the engine idling, he got out and went to the back of the car. In the cold air, clouds of white exhaust plumed from the tailpipe, but he could see clearly that everything was as it should be.

He stepped to the passenger side, which likewise revealed no damage, and got down on one knee to peer beneath the car. Nothing sagged from the undercarriage, nothing leaked.

The knock had been too loud and too forceful to have been of no importance.

He raised the hood, but the engine compartment revealed no obvious problem.

Perhaps his wife, Nicolette, had stowed something in the trunk, and it had fallen over. He leaned in through the open driver's door, switched off the engine, and plucked the keys from the ignition. When he unlocked the trunk, he found it empty.

Behind the wheel, he started the engine again. The thump and shudder were not repeated. All seemed well.

He drove away, under the dripping limbs of the purple beeches, off the grounds of the state hospital, and more than a mile along the county road before he found a section of the shoulder wide enough to allow him to park well clear of the pavement. He left the engine running but switched off the windshield wipers.

The car seat had power controls. He put it back as far as it would go from the steering wheel.

He had stopped in a rural area, flat fields to the left of the highway, a rising meadow to the right. On the slope were a few oak trees, almost black against the tall pale grass. Nearest between the shoulder of the road and the meadow, stood a ramshackle split-rail fence waiting for wood rot and weather to bring it down.

A skirling wind shattered rain against the car windows on every side. Beyond the streaming glass, the country scene melted into the amorphous shapes of a dreamscape.

As a detective, John was a cabinetmaker. He started with a theory just as a cabinetmaker started with scale drawings. He built his case with facts as real as wood and nails.

A police investigation, like crafting fine cabinetry, required dimensional imagination and much thought. After interviews, John's habit was to find a quiet place where he could be alone to think about what he'd learned while it remained fresh in his mind, and to determine if any new clues dovetailed with old ones.

His laptop computer rested on the passenger seat. He opened it on the console.

Days ago, he had downloaded and saved the 911 call that Billy had placed on that bloody night. John replayed it now:

"You better come. They're all dead."

"Who is dead, sir?"

"My mother, father, grandmother. My sister."

“Who is this?”

“Billy Lucas. I’m fourteen.”

“What’s your address there?”

“You know it already. It came up on your screen when I called.”

“Have you checked them for signs of life?”

“Yes, I checked them very closely for signs of life.”

“Have you had any first-aid training?”

“Trust me, they’re dead. I killed them. I killed them hard.”

“You killed them? Son, if this is a prank—”

“This isn’t a prank. The prank is over. I pranked them all. I pranked them good. Come see how I pranked them. It’s a beautiful thing. Good-bye now. I’ll be waiting for you on the front porch.”

Along the county road came two vehicles behind headlights. Seen through the smeared and misted windows, through the deluge, they had little detail and resembled bathyscaphs motoring through an oceanic trench.

As John watched the traffic pass, the puddled blacktop blazing in their beams, bright reflections coruscating along his streaming windows, the afternoon was further distorted and made strange. He was plagued by confusion, disconcerted to find himself—a man of reason—wandering in a fog of superstition.

He felt adrift in space and time, memory as valid as the moment.

Twenty years earlier and half a continent from here, four people had been murdered at their home. The Valdane family.

They had lived less than a third of a mile from the house in which John Calvino was raised. He knew them all. He went to school with Darcy Valdane and nursed a secret crush on her. He’d been fourteen at the time.

Elizabeth Valdane, the mother, was stabbed with a butcher knife. Like Sandra Lucas, Billy’s mother, Elizabeth had been found dead in her kitchen. Both women were wheelchair-bound.

Elizabeth’s husband, Anthony Valdane, was brutally bludgeoned with a hammer. The killer left the claw end of the implement embedded in the victim’s shattered skull—as Billy, too, had left the hammer in his father’s head.

Anthony had been attacked while sitting at the workbench in his garage; Robert Lucas had been clubbed to death in his study. As the hammer arced down, Anthony was building a birdhouse; Robert was writing a check to the electric company. Birds went homeless, bills went unpaid.

Victoria, Elizabeth Valdane’s sister, a widow who lived with them, had been punched in the face and strangled with a red silk scarf. Ann Lucas, Billy’s grandmother, a recent widow, was punched and subsequently strangled with such ferocity that the scarf—red this time, too—cut deep into her throat. The women’s relationships to their families were not identical, but eerily similar.

Fifteen-year-old Darcy Valdane endured rape before being stabbed to death with the same butcher knife used on her mother. Twenty years later, Celine Lucas, sixteen, was raped—then butchered with the same blade used on *her* mother.

Darcy had suffered nine knife wounds. Celine, too, was stabbed nine times.

Then I stabbed her precisely nine times...

Why did you say “precisely”?

Because, Johnny, I didn't stab her eight times, and I didn't stab her ten. Precisely nine.

In both cases, the order of the murders was the same: mother, father, widowed aunt/grandmother, and finally the daughter.

John Calvino's laptop directory contained a document titled "Then-Now," which he had composed over the past few days, listing the similarities between the Valdane-family and the Lucas-family murders. He didn't need to bring it to the screen, for he had committed it to memory.

A flatbed truck, transporting a large and arcane piece of farm machinery, roared past, casting up a spray of dirty water. In the murky light, the machine looked insectile and prehistoric, furthering the quality of unreality that characterized this drowned afternoon.

Cocooned in his car, as wind ceaselessly spun filaments of rain around it, John considered the faces of two murderers that phased like moons through his mind's eye.

The Lucas family had been destroyed by one of their own, by handsome blue-eyed Billy, an honor student and choirboy, his features smooth and innocent.

The Valdanes, who had no son, were murdered by an intruder whose looks were less appealing than those of Billy Lucas.

That long-ago killer had committed additional atrocities against three other families in the months that followed the Valdane murders. During the last of those crimes, he'd been shot to death.

The journal that he left behind, hundreds of handwritten pages, suggested that he had killed often prior to the Valdanes, generally one victim at a time. He didn't name them or say where those murders were committed. He didn't care to brag—until he started to kill entire families and felt that his work was then worthy of admiration. Aside from the story of his detestable origins, the journal consisted mostly of a demented philosophical ramble about death with a lowercase *d* and about what it was like to be Death with an uppercase *D*. He believed he had become "an immortal aspect" of the grim reaper.

His true name was Alton Turner Blackwood. He had lived under the false name Asmodeus. Itinerant, he had traveled ceaselessly in a series of stolen vehicles or hobo-style in boxcars, or sometimes as a ticketed passenger on buses. A vagrant, he slept in whatever vehicle he currently possessed, in abandoned buildings, in homeless shelters, in culverts and under bridges, in the backseats of twisted wrecks in automobile junkyards, in any shed left unlocked, once in an open grave covered by a canopy raised for a morning burial service, and secretly in church basements.

He stood six feet five, scarecrow-thin but strong. His hands were immense, the spatulate fingers as suctorial as the toe discs of a web-foot toad. Large bony wrists like robot joints, orangutan-long arms. His shoulder blades were thick and malformed, so that bat wings appeared to be furled under his shirt.

After each of the first three families had been savaged, Alton Blackwood had rung 911, not from the site of the murders, but from a public phone. His vanity required that the bodies be found while they were fresh, before the flamboyant process of decomposition upstaged his handiwork.

Blackwood was long dead, the four cases were closed, and the crimes occurred in a small city with inadequate protocols for the archiving of 911 calls. Of the three messages the killer had left, only one remained, regarding the second family, the Sollenburgs.

The previous day, John had solicited a copy of the recording, ostensibly as part of the Lucas investigation, and had received it by email as an MP3 file. He had loaded it into his laptop. Now he played it again.

When Blackwood spoke in an ordinary volume, his voice was a rat-tail file rasping against a bar of brass, but in the 911 calls, he spoke sotto voce, evidently to foil identification. His whisper sounded like an utterance by the progeny of snake and rat.

“I killed the Sollenburg family. Go to 866 Brandywine Lane.”

“Speak up please. Say again.”

“I’m the same artist who did the Valdane family.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not hearing you clearly.”

“You can’t keep me on the line long enough to find me.”

“Sir, if you could speak up—”

“Go see what I’ve done. It’s a beautiful thing.”

In his 911 call, Billy Lucas had said, *Come see how I pranked them. It’s a beautiful thing.*

To any police detective, the similarities between these two crimes, committed twenty years apart, would suggest that Billy Lucas read about Alton Turner Blackwood’s murder spree and imitated it as an homage to the killer.

But Billy had not mentioned Blackwood. Billy said not one word about his inspiration. Cautious of motive, he said only *Ruin*.

Thunder came and went, thunder with lightning and without. A few cars and trucks seemed to float past as if awash in a flood.

The state hospital was an hour’s drive from the city, where John lived and where he had an appointment to keep before he went home. He powered the driver’s seat forward, switched on the windshield wipers, released the hand brake, and put the Ford in gear.

He didn’t want to think what he was thinking, but the thought was a sentinel voice that would not be silenced. His wife and his children were in grave danger from someone doing something.

His family and two others before it were at risk, and he did not know if he could save any of them.

USING TWO SPOONS, MARION DUNNAWAY SCOOPED DOUGH from the steel mixing bowl, deftly shaped it into ball, and deposited it on the baking sheet, where eight others were arranged in rows.

“If I’d ever had children and now had grandchildren, I’d never let them near the Internet unless I was sitting beside them.”

She kept a tidy kitchen. Yellow-and-white curtains framed a view of the storm and seemed to bring order even to the chaotic weather.

“There’s too much sick stuff too easily accessed. If they see it when they’re young, the seed of an obsession might be planted.”

She scooped up more dough, spoon clicked against spoon, and a tenth cookie-to-be appeared almost magically on the Teflon sheet.

Marion had retired from the army after serving thirty-six years as a surgical nurse. Short, compact, sturdy, she radiated competence. Her strong hands attended to every task with brisk efficiency.

“Say a boy is just twelve when he comes across such trash. The mind of a twelve-year-old is highly fertile soil, Detective Calvino.”

“Highly,” John agreed from his chair at the dinette table.

“Any seed planted in it is likely to thrive, which is why you have to guard against an east wind that might blow in a weed pip.”

Under a helmet of thick white hair, Marion’s face was that of a fifty-year-old, though she was sixty-eight. Her smile was sweet, and John suspected her laugh would be hearty, though he doubted that he would ever hear it.

Warming his hands around his coffee mug, he said, “You think that’s what happened to Billy—some weed pip from the Internet?”

Having pressed an eleventh ball of dough to the baking sheet, she said nothing as she shaped the final cookie in the batch.

Then she raised her face to the window, staring toward the house next door. John assumed she was seeing beyond that place, imagining the house two doors away—the Lucas residence, the house of death.

“Damned if I know. They were a solid family. Good people. Billy was always polite. The nicest boy. So very considerate of his mother after the accident that put her in the wheelchair.”

She opened the oven. With a quilted mitt, she took out a tray of finished cookies and put it on the sinkside cutting board to cool.

A flood of hot air poured the aromas of chocolate and coconut and pecans through the kitchen. Curiously, instead of making John’s mouth water, the smell briefly nauseated him.

Marion said, “I served in field hospitals, battle zones. Front-line emergency surgeries. Saw a lot of violence, too much death.”

She slid the tray of neatly arranged dough balls into the oven, closed the door, and took off the quilted mitt.

“I got so I could tell at first sight which ones would survive their wounds, which wouldn’t.”

I could see death in their faces.”

From a drawer near the refrigerator, she extracted a key and brought it to the table.

“I never saw death in Billy. Not a glimpse of it. The Internet theory is just twiddle-twaddle. Detective Calvino. Just the jabber of an old woman who’s afraid to admit some evil can’t be explained.”

She gave him the key, which dangled from a beaded chain with a plastic cat charm. The cat was a grinning golden tabby.

Billy’s parents loved cats. They’d had two spayed British spotted shorthairs, green-eyed and frisky, named Posh and Fluff.

When the killing started, Posh and Fluff fled through a cat flap in the kitchen door. A neighbor, at the house across the street from the Lucases, found them shivering and crying under his back porch.

Pocketing the key, John rose. “Thank you for the coffee, ma’am.”

“I should have thought to turn the key in the day it happened.”

“No harm done,” he assured her.

Wondering if the Lucases might have traded house keys with a trusted neighbor, John had that morning made four cold calls before hearing what he hoped to hear from Maric Dunnaway.

“Let me give you some cookies for those kids you mentioned,” she said. “The earlier batches are cool.”

He sensed that he would disappoint her if he declined.

She put six cookies in a OneZip bag and escorted John to the front door. “I think of going up there to see Billy one day, if he’s allowed visitors. But what would I say?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing to say. You’re better off remembering him as he was. He’s very different now. You can do nothing for him.”

He had left his raincoat on the front-porch swing. He shrugged into it, put up the hood, went to his car at the curb, and drove two doors east to the Lucas house, where he parked in the driveway.

Perhaps an hour of daylight remained before the rain washed darkness down the day.

Fat snails, with eye stalks questing, crossed the wet front walkway, venturing from one grassy realm to another. John avoided crushing them underfoot.

To accommodate Sandra Lucas in her wheelchair, the porch offered both steps and a ramp.

He took off his raincoat, shook it, and folded it over his left arm because the only other place to put it was a glider with stained yellow cushions. After Billy finished with his sister and called 911, he had come to the front porch and had sat on the glider, naked and drenched in blood.

In most jurisdictions, after attaining the age of fourteen, children are presumed to have sufficient capacity to form criminal intent. Neither moral nor emotional insanity—a distinction from mental—exempts the perpetrator from responsibility for his crimes.

To the first two police officers on the scene, Billy offered his sister for ten dollars each and told them where she could be found. “Just leave twenty bucks on the nightstand,” he said. “And don’t have a cigarette after. This house is a no-smoking zone.”

Now the police-department seal had been peeled off the front door. Two days previously, long after the criminalists collected trace evidence and prints, after a review of that evidence

supported Billy's confession in every detail, after the boy was evaluated by psychiatrists, and after he was remanded to the state hospital under a preliminary finding of insanity to be reaffirmed or reconsidered in sixty days, the house ceased to be an active crime scene.

No one from the department would have come by merely to remove the seals from the exterior doors. Because the Lucases had no family nearby, perhaps an attorney, serving as executor, had been here to review the condition of the house.

John used the key with the dangling cat charm. He went inside, closed the door, and stood in the foyer, listening to this home that had become a slaughterhouse.

He possessed no authority to enter these premises. Technically, the case file remained open until Billy could be evaluated in sixty days, but the investigation was inactive. Anyway, this had never been John's assignment.

If he'd been unable to discover a neighbor with a key, his only alternative would have been to force entry. He would have done it.

With his back against the front door, he sensed that someone waited for him in one of the surrounding rooms, but this was a false perception. In other murder houses, after the bodies were removed and the evidence collected, when he returned alone to consider the scene in solitude, he usually experienced this disturbing impression of a presence looming, but it always proved to be unfounded.

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