## DEAN KONTZ

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The Husband

# The Husband

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# The Husband

#### Also by DEAN KOONTZ

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 \* False Memory \* Seize the Night \* Fear Nothing \*
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DEAN KOONTZ'S FRANKENSTEIN
Book One: Prodigal Son - with Kevin J. Anderson
Book Two: City of Night - with Ed Gorman

### DEAN KOONTZ

This novel is dedicated to Andy and Anne Wickstrom, and to Wesley J. Smith and Debra J. Saunders:

two good husbands and their good wives,
also good friends, who always brighten
the corner where they are.

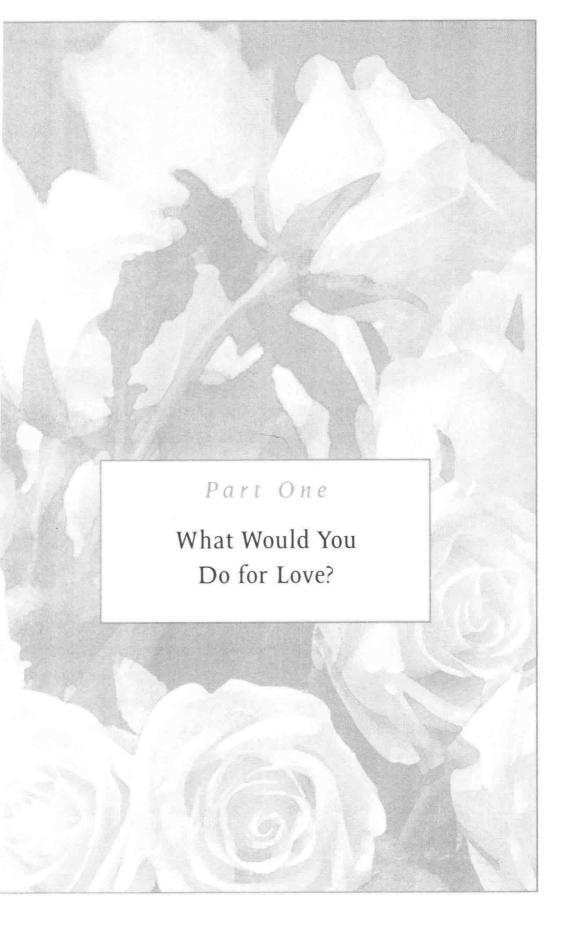
### Courage is grace under pressure. —Ernest Hemingway

That Love is all there is,

Is all we know of Love. . . .

—Emily Dickinson

# The Husband



### 1

A man begins dying at the moment of his birth. Most people live in denial of Death's patient courtship until, late in life and deep in sickness, they become aware of him sitting bedside.

Eventually, Mitchell Rafferty would be able to cite the minute that he began to recognize the inevitability of his death: Monday, May 14, 11:43 in the morning—three weeks short of his twenty-eighth birthday.

Until then, he had rarely thought of dying. A born optimist, charmed by nature's beauty and amused by humanity, he had no cause or inclination to wonder when and how his mortality would be proven.

When the call came, he was on his knees.

Thirty flats of red and purple impatiens remained to be planted. The flowers produced no fragrance, but the fertile smell of the soil pleased him.

His clients, these particular homeowners, liked saturated

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colors: red, purple, deep yellow, hot pink. They would not accept white blooms or pastels.

Mitch understood them. Raised poor, they had built a successful business by working hard and taking risks. To them, life was intense, and saturated colors reflected the truth of nature's vehemence.

This apparently ordinary but in fact momentous morning, the California sun was a buttery ball. The sky had a basted sheen.

Pleasantly warm, not searing, the day nevertheless left a greasy sweat on Ignatius Barnes. His brow glistened. His chin dripped.

At work in the same bed of flowers, ten feet from Mitch, Iggy looked boiled. From May until July, his skin responded to the sun not with melanin but with a fierce blush. For one-sixth of the year, before he finally tanned, he appeared to be perpetually embarrassed.

Iggy did not possess an understanding of symmetry and harmony in landscape design, and he couldn't be trusted to trim roses properly. He was a hard worker, however, and good if not intellectually bracing company.

"You hear what happened to Ralph Gandhi?" Iggy asked.

"Who's Ralph Gandhi?"

"Mickey's brother."

"Mickey Gandhi? I don't know him, either."

"Sure you do," Iggy said. "Mickey, he hangs out sometimes at Rolling Thunder."

Rolling Thunder was a surfers' bar.

"I haven't been there in years," Mitch said.

- "Years? Are you serious?"
- "Entirely."
- "I thought you still dropped in sometimes."
- "So I've really been missed, huh?"
- "I'll admit, nobody's named a bar stool after you. What—did you find someplace better than Rolling Thunder?"
- "Remember coming to my wedding three years ago?" Mitch asked.
  - "Sure. You had great seafood tacos, but the band was woofy."
  - "They weren't woofy."
  - "Man, they had tambourines."
  - "We were on a budget. At least they didn't have an accordion."
  - "Because playing an accordion exceeded their skill level."
- Mitch troweled a cavity in the loose soil. "They didn't have finger bells, either."
- Wiping his brow with one forearm, Iggy complained: "I must have Eskimo genes. I break a sweat at fifty degrees."
  - Mitch said, "I don't do bars anymore. I do marriage."
  - "Yeah, but can't you do marriage and Rolling Thunder?"
  - "I'd just rather be home than anywhere else."
  - "Oh, boss, that's sad," said Iggy.
  - "It's not sad. It's the best."
- "If you put a lion in a zoo three years, six years, he never forgets what freedom was like."
- Planting purple impatiens, Mitch said, "How would you know? You ever asked a lion?"
  - "I don't have to ask one. I am a lion."
  - "You're a hopeless boardhead."

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"And proud of it. I'm glad you found Holly. She's a great lady. But *I've* got my freedom."

"Good for you, Iggy. And what do you do with it?"

"Do with what?"

"Your freedom. What do you do with your freedom?"

"Anything I want."

"Like, for example?"

"Anything. Like, if I want sausage pizza for dinner, I don't have to ask anyone what *she* wants."

"Radical."

"If I want to go to Rolling Thunder for a few beers, there's nobody to bitch at me."

"Holly doesn't bitch."

"I can get beer-slammed every night if I want, and nobody's gonna be calling to ask when am I coming home."

Mitch began to whistle "Born Free."

"Some wahine comes on to me," Iggy said, "I'm free to rock and roll."

"They're coming on to you all the time—are they?—those sexy wahines?"

"Women are bold these days, boss. They see what they want, they just take it."

Mitch said, "Iggy, the last time you got laid, John Kerry thought he was going to be president."

"That's not so long ago."

"So what happened to Ralph?"

"Ralph who?"

"Mickey Gandhi's brother."

"Oh, yeah. An iguana bit off his nose."

"Nasty."

"Some fully macking ten-footers were breaking, so Ralph and some guys went night-riding at the Wedge."

The Wedge was a famous surfing spot at the end of the Balboa Peninsula, in Newport Beach.

Iggy said, "They packed coolers full of submarine sandwiches and beer, and one of them brought Ming."

"Ming?"

"That's the iguana."

"So it was a pet?"

"Ming, he'd always been sweet before."

"I'd expect iguanas to be moody."

"No, they're affectionate. What happened was some wanker, not even a surfer, just a wannabe tag-along, slipped Ming a quarter-dose of meth in a piece of salami."

"Reptiles on speed," Mitch said, "is a bad idea."

"Meth Ming was a whole different animal from clean-andsober Ming," Iggy confirmed.

Putting down his trowel, sitting back on the heels of his work shoes, Mitch said, "So now Ralph Gandhi is noseless?"

"Ming didn't eat the nose. He just bit it off and spit it out."

"Maybe he didn't like Indian food."

"They had a big cooler full of ice water and beer. They put the nose in the cooler and rushed it to the hospital."

"Did they take Ralph, too?"

"They had to take Ralph. It was his nose."

"Well," Mitch said, "we are talking about boardheads."

"They said it was kinda blue when they fished it out of the ice water, but a plastic surgeon sewed it back on, and now it's not blue anymore."

"What happened to Ming?"

"He crashed. He was totally amped-out for a day. Now he's his old self."

"That's good. It's probably hard to find a clinic that'll do iguana rehab."

Mitch got to his feet and retrieved three dozen empty plastic plant pots. He carried them to his extended-bed pickup.

The truck stood at the curb, in the shade of an Indian laurel. Although the neighborhood had been built-out only five years earlier, the big tree had already lifted the sidewalk. Eventually the insistent roots would block lawn drains and invade the sewer system.

The developer's decision to save one hundred dollars by not installing a root barrier would produce tens of thousands in repair work for plumbers, landscapers, and concrete contractors.

When Mitch planted an Indian laurel, he always used a root barrier. He didn't need to make future work for himself. Green growing Nature would keep him busy.

The street lay silent, without traffic. Not the barest breath of a breeze stirred the trees.

From a block away, on the farther side of the street, a man and a dog approached. The dog, a retriever, spent less time walking than it did sniffing messages left by others of its kind.

The stillness pooled so deep that Mitch almost believed he could hear the panting of the distant canine.