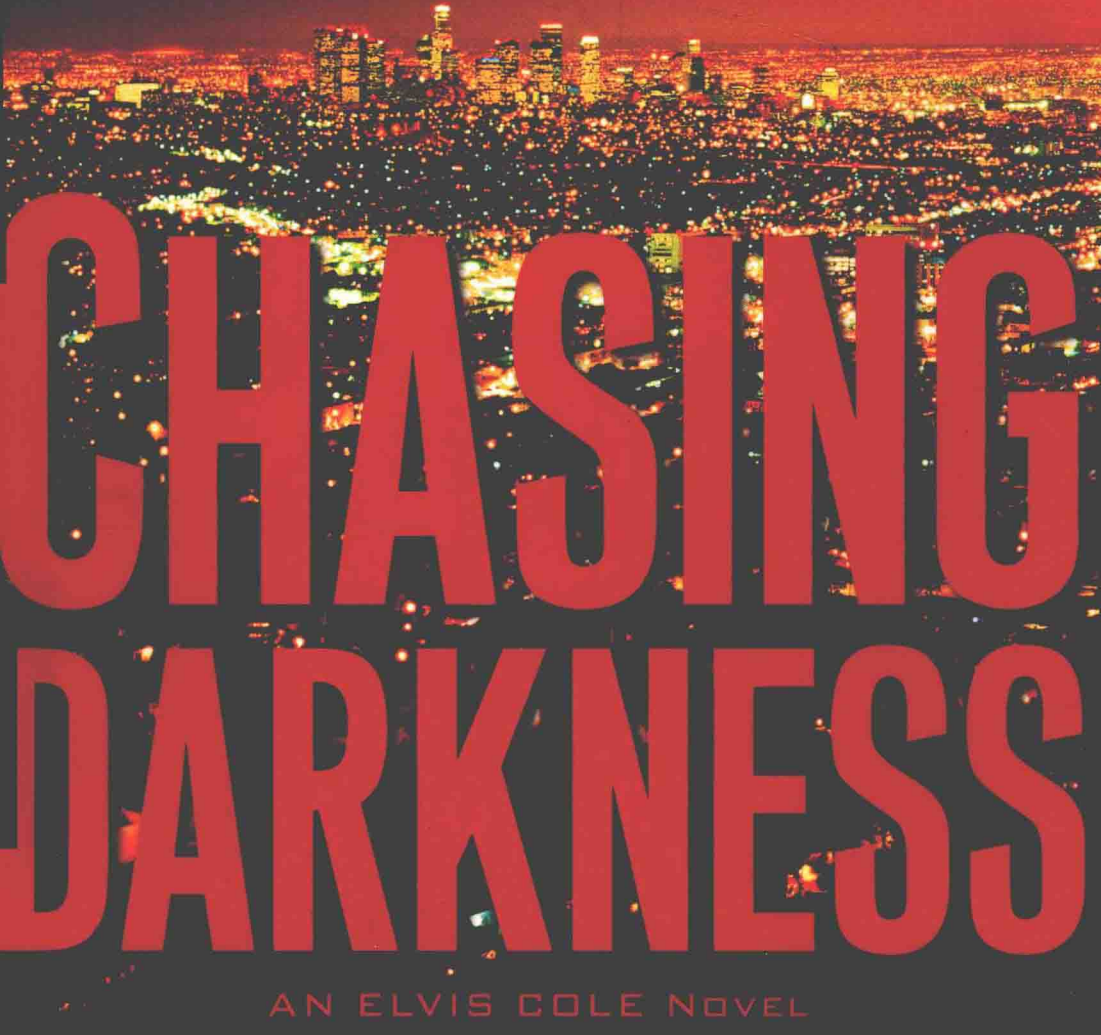


A NOVEL FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *THE TWO MINUTE RULE* AND *THE WATCHMAN*

# ROBERT CRAIS

An aerial night view of a city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers and city lights reflecting on the water in the foreground. The image is used as a background for the title text.

# CHASING DARKNESS

AN ELVIS COLE NOVEL

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*An Elvis Cole Novel*

ROBERT  
CRAIS

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*for Shelby Rotolo  
because rope ladders and  
Christmas tree forts last forever*

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# PROLOGUE





BEAKMAN AND Trenchard could smell the fire—it was still a mile away, but a sick desert wind carried the promise of Hell. Fire crews from around the city were converging on Laurel Canyon like red angels, as were black-and-white Adam cars, Emergency Services vehicles, and water-dropping helicopters out of Van Nuys and Burbank. The helicopters pounded by so low that Beakman and Trenchard could not hear their supervisor. Beakman cupped his ear.

*“What did you say?”*

Their supervisor, a patrol sergeant named Karen Philips, leaned into their car and shouted again.

“Start at the top of Lookout Mountain. Emergency Services is already up, but you gotta make sure those people leave. Don’t take any shit. You got it?”

Trenchard, who was senior and also driving, shouted back.

“We’re on it.”

They jumped into line with the fire engines racing up Laurel Canyon, then climbed Lookout Mountain Avenue up the steep hill. Once home to rock ‘n’ roll royalty from Mama Cass Elliot to Frank Zappa to Jim Morrison, Laurel Canyon had been the birthplace of country rock in the sixties. Crosby, Stills, and Nash had all lived there. So had Eric Burdon, Keith Richards, and, more recently, Marilyn Manson and at least one of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Beakman, who banged away at a Fender Telecaster in a cop band called Nightstix, thought the place was musical magic.

Beakman pointed at a small house.

“I think Joni Mitchell used to live there.”

"Who gives a shit? You see that sky? Man, look at that. The frakin' air is on fire!"

A charcoal bruise smudged the sky as smoke pushed toward Sunset Boulevard. Beginning as a house fire at the crest of the Hollywood Hills, the flames had jumped to the brush in Laurel Canyon Park, then spread with the wind. Three houses had already been lost, and more were threatened. Beakman would have plenty of stories for his kids when he returned to his day job on Monday.

Jonathan Beakman was a Level II Reserve Officer with the Los Angeles Police Department, which meant he was armed, fully sworn, and did everything a full-time uniformed officer did, except he did it only two days a month. In his regular life, Beakman taught high-school algebra. His kids weren't particularly interested in the Pythagorean theorem, but they bombed him with questions after his weekend ride in the car.

Trenchard, who had twenty-three years on the job and didn't like music, said, "Here's how it goes down—we get to the top, we'll leave the car and work down five or six houses on foot, me on one side, you on the other, then go back for the car and do it again. Should go pretty quick like that."

The Fire Department had been through the area, broadcasting an order to evacuate over their public-address system. A few residents already had their cars piled high with clothes, golf clubs, pillows, and dogs. Others stood in their front doors, watching their neighbors pack. A few were on their roofs, soaking their homes with garden hoses. Beakman worried the hosers might be a problem.

"What if somebody won't leave?"

"We're not here to arrest people. We have too much ground to cover."

"What if someone can't leave, like an invalid?"

"First pass, we want to make sure everyone gets the word. If someone needs more help, we'll radio down or come back after we reach the bottom."

Trenchard, ever wise for a man who didn't like music, glanced over.

"You okay?"

"A little nervous, maybe. One of these houses, you watch. Some old lady's gonna have fifteen pugs waddling around. What are we going to do with fifteen pugs?"

Trenchard laughed, and Beakman found himself smiling, though his smile quickly faded. They passed a little girl following her mother to an SUV, the girl dragging a cat carrier so heavy she couldn't lift it. Her mother was crying.

Beakman thought, This is awful.

When they reached the top of Lookout Mountain, they started the door-to-door. If the inhabitants weren't already in the act of evacuating, Beakman knocked and rang the bell, then pounded on the jamb with his Maglite. Once, he hammered at a door so long that Trenchard shouted from across the street.

"You're gonna knock down the goddamned door! If they don't answer, nobody's home."

When they reached the first cross street, Trenchard joined him. The cross street cut up a twisting break in the ridge and was lined with clapboard cabins and crumbling stone bungalows that had probably been built in the thirties. The lots were so narrow that most of the houses sat on top of their own garages.

Trenchard said, "Can't be more than eight or ten houses in here. C'mon."

They split sides again and went to work, though most of the residents were already leaving. Beakman cleared the first three houses easily enough, then climbed the steps to a run-down stucco bungalow. Knock, bell, Maglite.

"Police officer. Anyone home?"

He decided no one was home, and was halfway down the steps when a woman called from across the street. Her Mini Cooper was packed and ready to go.

"I think he's home. He doesn't go out."

Beakman glanced up at the door he had just left. He had banged on the jamb so hard the door had rattled.

"He's an invalid?"

"Mr. Jones. He has a bad foot, but I don't know. I haven't seen him in a few days. Maybe he's gone, but I don't know. He doesn't move so well, that's why I'm saying."

Now she had the irritated expression of someone who wished she hadn't gotten involved.

Beakman climbed back to the door.

"What's his name?"

"Jones. That's all I know, Mr. Jones. He doesn't move so well."

Beakman unleashed the Maglite again. Hard.

"Mr. Jones? Police officer, is anyone home?"

Trenchard, finished with his side of the street, came up the stairs behind him.

"We got a holdout?"

"Lady says the man here doesn't move so well. She thinks he might be home."

Trenchard used his own Maglite on the door.

"Police officers. This is an emergency. Please open the door."

Both of them leaned close to listen, and that's when Beakman caught the sour smell. Trenchard smelled it, too, and called down to the woman.

"He old, sick, what?"

"Not so old. He has a bad foot."

Down on the street, she couldn't smell it.

Beakman lowered his voice.

"You smell it, right?"

"Yeah. Let's see what's what."

Trenchard holstered his Maglite. Beakman stepped back, figuring Trenchard was going to kick down the door, but Trenchard just tried the knob and opened it. A swarm of black flies rode out on the smell, engulfed them, then flew back into the house. Beakman swatted at the flies. He didn't want them to touch him. Not after where they had been.

The woman shouted up, "What is it?"

They saw a man seated in a ragged club chair, wearing baggy plaid shorts and a thin blue T-shirt. He was barefoot, allowing Beakman to see that half the right foot was missing. The scarring suggested the injury to his foot occurred a long time ago, but he had a more recent injury.

Beakman followed Trenchard into the house for a closer look. The remains of the man's head lolled backwards, where blood and

brain matter had drained onto the club chair and his shoulders. His right hand rested on his lap, limply cupping a black pistol. A single black hole had been punched beneath his chin. Dried blood the color of black cherries was crusted over his face and neck and the chair.

Trenchard said, "That's a damn bad foot."

"Suicide?"

"Duh. I'll call. We can't leave this guy until they get someone here to secure the scene."

"What about the fire?"

"Fuck the fire. They gotta get someone up here to wait for the CI. I don't want us to get stuck with this stink."

Trenchard swatted futilely at the flies and ducked like a boxer slipping a punch as he moved for the door. Beakman, fascinated, circled the dead man.

Trenchard said, "Don't touch anything. We gotta treat it like a crime scene."

"I'm just looking."

A photo album lay open between the dead man's feet as if it had fallen from his lap. Careful not to step in the dried blood, Beakman moved closer to see. A single picture was centered on the open page, one of those Polaroid pictures that develop themselves. The plastic over the picture was speckled with blood.

The flies suddenly seemed louder to Beakman, as loud now as the helicopters fighting the flames.

"Trench, come here—"

Trenchard came over, then stooped for a closer look.

"Holy Mother."

The Polaroid showed a female Caucasian with what appeared to be an extension cord wrapped around her neck. The picture had been taken at night, with the woman sprawled on her back at the base of a trash bin. Her tongue protruded thickly from her mouth, and her eyes bulged, but they were unfocused and sightless.

Beakman heard himself whispering.

"You think it's real? A real woman, really dead?"

"Dunno."

"Maybe it's from a movie. You know, staged?"

Trenchard opened his knife, then used the point to turn the page.

Beakman grew scared. He might have been only a reserve officer, but he knew better than to disturb the scene.

"We're not supposed to touch anything."

"We're not. Shut up."

Trenchard turned to the next page, then the next. Beakman felt numb but excited, knowing he was seeing a darkness so terrible that few people would ever imagine it, let alone face it. These pictures were portraits of evil. The mind that had conceived of these things and taken these pictures and hidden them in this album had entered a nightmare world. It had left humanity behind. Beakman would have stories for his kids when he returned to school, but this story would not be among them.

"They're real, aren't they? These women were murdered."

"I dunno."

"They look real. He fucking killed them."

"Stop it."

Trenchard lifted the album with his knife so they could see the cover. It showed a beautiful sunset beach with gentle waves and a couple leaving footprints in the sand. Embossed in flowing script was a legend: *My Happy Memories*.

Trenchard lowered the cover.

"Let's get away from these flies."

They left the album as they had found it, and sought comfort in the smoky air.

PART ONE

# LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN





OUR OFFICE was a good place to be that morning. There was only the tocking of the Pinocchio clock, the scratch of my pen, and the hiss of the air conditioner fighting a terrible heat. Fire season had arrived, when fires erupted across the Southland like pimples on adolescent skin.

Joe Pike was waiting for me to finish the paperwork. He stood at the French doors that open onto my balcony, staring across the city toward the ocean. He had not spoken nor moved in more than twenty minutes, which was nothing for Pike. He often went soundless for days. We were going to work out at Ray Depente's gym in South-Central Los Angeles when I finished the grind.

The first call came at nine forty-two.

A male voice said, "Are you Elvis Cole?"

"That's right. How can I help you?"

"You're a dead man."

I killed the call and went back to work. When you do what I do, you get calls from schizophrenics, escapees from Area 51, and people claiming to know who killed the Black Dahlia and Princess Diana.

Pike said, "Who was it?"

"Some guy told me I was a dead man."

Pike said, "Smoke."

I glanced up from the work.

"Where?"

"Malibu, looks like. Maybe Topanga."

Then Pike turned toward the door, and everything that had been normal about that ordinary morning changed.

"Listen—"