

# JOHN KATZENBACH

Bestselling author of *Hart's War*

# THE ANALYST

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John Katzenbach

A Ballantine Book  
Published by The Ballantine Publishing Group

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in the United States by The Ballantine Publishing Group, a  
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ISBN 0-345-42626-6

Text design by Holly Johnson

Manufactured in the United States of America

## Part One

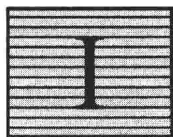
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# THE UNWELCOME LETTER



## Chapter One

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In the year he fully expected to die, he spent the majority of his fifty-third birthday as he did most other days, listening to people complain about their mothers. Thoughtless mothers, cruel mothers, sexually provocative mothers. Dead mothers who remained alive in their children's minds. Living mothers, whom their children wanted to kill. Mr. Bishop, in particular, along with Miss Levy and the genuinely unlucky Roger Zimmerman, who shared his Upper West Side apartment and it seemed the entirety of both his waking life and his vivid dreams with a hypochondriac, manipulative, shrewish woman who seemed dedicated to nothing less than ruining her only child's every meager effort at independence—all of them used the entirety of their hours that day to effuse bitter vitriol about the women who had brought them into this world.

He listened quietly to great surges of murderous hatred, only occasionally interjecting the most modest of benign comments, never once interrupting the anger that spewed forth from the couch, all the time wishing that just one of his patients would take a deep breath and step back from their rage for an instant and see it for what it truly was: fury with themselves. He knew, through experience and training, that eventually, after years of talking bitterly in the oddly detached world of the analyst's office, all of them, even poor, desperate, and crippled Roger Zimmerman, would reach that understanding themselves.

Still, the occasion of his birthday, which reminded him most directly of his own mortality, made him wonder whether he would have enough

time remaining to see any of them through to that moment of acceptance which is the analyst's eureka. His own father had died shortly after he reached his fifty-third year, heart weakened through years of chain smoking and stress, a fact that he knew lurked subtly and malevolently beneath his consciousness. So, as the unpleasant Roger Zimmerman moaned and whined his way through the final few minutes of the last session of the day, he was slightly distracted, and not paying the complete attention he should have been when he heard the faint triple buzz of the bell he'd installed in his waiting room.

The bell was his standard signal that a patient had arrived. Every new client was told prior to their first session that upon entry, they were to produce two short rings, in quick succession, followed by a third, longer peal. This was to differentiate the ring from any tradesman, meter reader, neighbor, or delivery service that might have arrived at his door.

Without shifting position, he glanced over at his daybook, next to the clock he kept on the small table behind the patient's head, out of their sight. The six P.M. entry was blank. The clock face read twelve minutes to six, and Roger Zimmerman seemed to stiffen in his position on the couch.

"I thought I was the last every day."

He did not respond.

"No one has ever come in after me, at least not that I can remember. Not once. Have you changed your schedule around without telling me?"

Again, he did not reply.

"I don't like the idea that someone comes after me," Zimmerman said decisively. "I want to be last."

"Why do you think you feel that way?" he finally questioned.

"In its own special way, last is the same as first," Zimmerman answered with a harshness of tone that implied that any idiot would have seen the same.

He nodded. Zimmerman had made an intriguing and accurate observation. But, as the poor fellow seemed forever doomed to do, he had made it in the session's final moment. Not at the start, where they might have managed some profitable discussion over the remaining fifty minutes. "Try to bring that thought with you tomorrow," he said. "We could begin there. I'm afraid our time is up for today."

Zimmerman hesitated, before rising. "Tomorrow? Correct me if I'm mistaken, but tomorrow is the last day before you disappear for your damn stupid August vacation the same as you do every damn year. What good will that do me?"

Again, he remained silent, letting the query remain floating in the space above the patient's head. Zimmerman snorted loudly. "Whoever's out there's probably more interesting than I am anyway, huh?" he said bitterly. Then Zimmerman swung his feet off the couch and looked up toward the doctor. "I don't like it when something is different," he said sharply. "I don't like it at all." He tossed a quick, pointed glare at the doctor as he rose, shaking his shoulders, letting a nasty snarl creep across his face. "It's supposed to always be the same. I come in, lie down, start talking. Last patient every day. That's the way it's supposed to be. No one likes change." He sighed, but this time with more than a touch of anger, not resignation. "All right. Tomorrow, then. Last session before you take off for Paris, Cape Cod, Mars, or wherever you head for and leave me all god-damn alone." Zimmerman pivoted abruptly and strode purposely across the small office, and out the exit door without once looking back.

For a moment, he remained in his armchair, listening for the faint sound of the angry man's footsteps resounding down the exterior hallway. Then he rose, feeling some of the age that had stiffened his joints and tightened his muscles during the long and sedentary afternoon behind the couch, and made his way to the entrance, a second door that led to his modest waiting room. In some respects, this room with its odd, unlikely design, where he'd established his practice decades ago, was unique, and had been the sole reason he'd rented the apartment in the year after he'd finished his residency and the reason he'd stayed there more than a quarter century.

The office had three doors: one which led to the vestibule, which he'd reinvented as a tiny waiting room; a second, which led directly out to the apartment building corridor; and a third, which took him inside to the modest kitchen, living area, and bedroom of the remainder of the apartment. His office was a sort of personal island, with portals to these other worlds. He often regarded it as a nether-space, a bridge between different realities. He liked that, because he believed the separation of the office from the great outside helped make his own job somewhat easier.

He had no idea which of his patients had returned without an appointment. He could not immediately recall a single instance of a patient doing that, in all his years of practice.

Nor was he able to imagine which patient was in crisis sufficiently to throw such an unexpected change in the relationship between analyst and analysand. Routine was what he built on, routine and longevity, where the sheer weight of words spoken in the artificial but absolute sanctity of the analyst's office finally paved themselves into roads of understanding.



Zimmerman was right about that. Change went against the grain. So he briskly crossed the room with the modestly gathered pace of anticipation, slightly unsettled at the idea that something of possible urgency had entered a life he frequently feared had become far too stolid and utterly predictable.

He opened the door to the waiting room and stared ahead.

The room was empty.

For a moment, he was confused, and thought perhaps that he'd imagined the bell ringing, but then, Mr. Zimmerman had heard it as well, and he, too, had recognized the distinctive noise signaling that someone familiar was present in the waiting room.

"Hello?" he said, although there was clearly no one there to hear him.

He could sense his forehead knitting with surprise, and he adjusted the wire-rim glasses perched on his nose. "Curious," he said out loud. And then he noticed the envelope left behind on the seat of the single stiff-backed chair he provided for patients waiting for their appointments. He exhaled slowly, shook his head back and forth, and thought this was a bit overly melodramatic, even for the membership of his current list of patients.

He stepped over and picked up the envelope. His name was typed on the outside.

"How unusual," he said out loud. He hesitated before opening the letter, holding it up to his forehead the way Johnny Carson used to, when engaged in his Carnac the Magnificent routine, trying, in that instant, to guess which of his patients had left it for him. But it was an act that seemed uncharacteristic among the dozen he saw regularly. They all liked to voice their complaints about what they perceived as his many inadequacies and shortcomings directly and frequently, which while sometimes irritating, remained an integral part of the process.

He tore open the envelope and withdrew two sheets of paper filled with typing. He read only the first line:

*Happy 53rd birthday, doctor. Welcome to the first day of your death.*

He breathed in sharply. The stale air of the apartment seemed to make him dizzy, and he reached out quickly for the wall, to steady himself.

Dr. Frederick Starks, a man in the profession of introspection, lived alone, haunted by other people's memories.

He walked over to his small, antique maple desk, a gift fifteen years earlier from his wife. It had been three years since she passed away, and when he sat down at the desk it seemed he could still hear her voice. He spread the two sheets of the letter out in front of him on the blotter. He thought to himself that it had been a decade since he'd actually been afraid of something, and what he'd been afraid of then was the diagnosis delivered by the oncologist to his wife. Now, this new dry, acid taste on his tongue was as unwelcome as the acceleration of his heart, which he could feel racing in his chest.

He took a second or two to try to calm the rapid beating, waiting patiently until he could feel the rate settle slowly. He was acutely aware of his loneliness at that moment, hating the vulnerability that solitude created within him.

Ricky Starks—he rarely let anyone know how much he greatly preferred the playground and frat house sound of the informal abbreviation to the more sonorous Frederick—was a man of necessary routine and order. He was devoted to a regularity that bordered on religion and certainly touched obsession; by imposing so much reason on his own day-to-day life, he thought it was the only safe way to try to make sense of the turmoil and chaos that his patients brought to him daily. He was a slight man physically, an inch or two short of six feet, with a thin, ascetic body helped by a daily lunchtime course of brisk walking exercise and a steadfast refusal to indulge in the sweets and ice creams that he secretly adored.

He wore glasses, which wasn't unusual for a man his age, though he took pride in the detail that his prescription still was minimal. He took pride, as well, that although thinned, his hair still rode upright on his scalp like wheat on a prairie. He no longer smoked, and took only a rare glass of wine on an occasional evening to help him sleep. He was a man who had grown accustomed to his solitude, undaunted by eating dinner in a restaurant alone, or attending a Broadway show or current movie by himself. He thought the inventory of his body and mind to be in excellent condition. He felt far younger than his years most days. But he was acutely aware that the year he was entering was the year that his father had failed to live past, and despite that lack of logic in this observation, he had not thought that he would live past fifty-three, either, as if such an act would be unfair, or was somehow inappropriate. And yet, he thought contradictorily to himself, as he stared again at the first words of the letter, *I am not yet ready to die*. Then he read on, slowly, pausing over each sentence, allowing dread and disquiet to take root within him.

*I exist somewhere in your past.*

*You ruined my life. You may not know how, or why, or even when, but you did. Brought disaster and sadness to my every second. You ruined my life. And now I fully intend to ruin yours.*

Ricky Starks breathed in hard again. He lived in a world common with false threats and fake promises, but knew immediately that the words in front of him were far different from those meandering rantings he was accustomed to hearing daily.

*At first, I thought I should simply kill you to settle the score.*

*Then I realized that was simply too easy. You are a pathetically facile target, doctor. You do not lock your doors during the day. You take the same walk on the same route Monday through Friday. On weekends, you remain wondrously predictable, right down to the trip out on Sunday morning to pick up the Times, an onion bagel, and a hazelnut coffee, two sugars, no milk, at the trendy coffee bar two blocks to your south.*

*Far too easy. Stalking and killing you wouldn't have been much of a challenge. And, given the ease with which this murder could be accomplished, I wasn't certain that it would deliver the necessary satisfaction.*

*I've decided I would prefer you to kill yourself.*

Ricky Starks shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He could feel heat rippling up from the words in front of him, like fire catching in a woodstove, caressing his forehead and cheeks. His lips were dry, and he fruitlessly ran his tongue over them.

*Kill yourself, doctor.*

*Jump from a bridge. Blow your brains out with a handgun. Step in front of a midtown bus. Leap in front of a subway train. Turn on the gas stove and blow out the pilot light. Find a convenient beam and hang yourself. The method you choose is entirely up to you.*

*But it is your best chance.*

*Your suicide will be far more appropriate, given the precise circumstances of our relationship. And certainly a far more satisfying method for you to pay off your debt to me.*

So, here is the game we are going to play: You have exactly fifteen days, starting tomorrow morning at six A.M., to discover who I am. If you succeed, you must purchase one of those tiny one-column ads that run along the bottom of the daily New York Times front page, and print my name there. That's all: Just print my name.

If you do not, then . . . well, this is the fun part. You will take note that the second sheet of this letter contains the names of fifty-two of your relatives. They range in age from a newborn, barely six months old, the child of your great-grand-niece, to your cousin the Wall Street investor, and capitalist extraordinaire, who is as dried-up and dull as you. If you are unable to purchase the ad as described, then you have this choice: Kill yourself immediately or I will destroy one of these innocent people.

Destroy.

What an intriguing word. It could mean financial ruin. It could mean social wreckage. It could mean psychological rape.

It could also mean murder. That's for you to wonder about. It could be someone young, or someone old. Male or female. Rich or poor.

All I promise is that it will be the sort of event that they—or their loved ones—will never recover from, no matter how many years they might spend in psychoanalysis.

And whatever it is, you will live every remaining second of every minute you have left on this earth with the knowledge that you alone caused it.

Unless, of course, you take the more honorable approach and kill yourself first, saving whichever target I have selected from their fate.

There's your choice: my name or your obituary. In the same paper, of course.

As proof of the length of my reach, and the extent of my planning, I have this day contacted one of the names on the list with a most modest little message. I would urge you to spend the remainder of this evening ferreting out who was touched, and how. Then you can begin on the true task before you without delay in the morning.

I do not, of course, truly expect you to be able to guess my identity.

So, to demonstrate that I am a sporting type, I've decided that from time to time over the next fifteen days I will provide you with a clue or two. Just to make things more interesting, although a clever,

*intuitive sort, such as yourself, should assume that this entire letter is filled with clues. Nevertheless, here is a preview, and it comes for free.*

*In the past, life was fun and wild,  
Mother, father, and young child.  
But all the good times went astray,  
When my father sailed away.*

*Poetry is not my strong suit.*

*Hatred is.*

*You may ask three questions. Yes or No answers, please.*

*Use the same method, the front-page ads in the New York Times.*

*I will reply in my own style within twenty-four hours.*

*Good luck. You might also try to find time now to make your funeral arrangements. Cremation is probably preferable to an elaborate burial service. I know how much you dislike churches. I don't think it would be a smart idea to contact the police. They would probably mock you, which I suspect your conceit would have difficulty handling. And it would likely enrage me more, and, right now, you must be a little uncertain as to how unstable I actually am. I might respond erratically, in any number of quite evil ways. But of one thing of which you can be absolutely certain: My anger knows no limits.*

The letter was signed in all-capital letters:

RUMPLESTILTSKIN

Ricky Starks sat back hard in his chair, as if the fury emanating from the words on the page in front of him had been able to strike him in the face like a fist. He pushed himself to his feet, walked over to the window and cracked it open, allowing the city sounds to burst into the quiet of the small room, carried by an unexpected late July breeze that promised an evening thunderstorm might be tracking the city. He breathed in, looking for something in the air to give him a sense of relief from the heat that had overcome him. He could hear the high-pitched caterwaul of a police siren a few blocks distant, and the steady cacophony of car horns that is like white noise in Manhattan. He took two or three deep breaths, then pulled the window closed, shutting away all the outside sounds of normal urban life.

He turned back to the letter.

I am in trouble, he thought. But how much, he was initially unsure.

He realized that he was being deeply threatened, but the parameters

of that threat were still unclear. A significant part of him insisted he ignore the document on the desktop. Simply refuse to play what didn't sound like much of a game. He snorted once, allowing this thought to flourish. All his training and experience suggested that doing nothing was the most reasonable course of action. After all, often the analyst finds that maintaining silence and a failure to respond to the most provocative and outrageous behavior by a patient is the cleverest way to get to the psychological truth of those actions. He stood up and walked around the desk twice, like a dog sniffing at an unusual smell.

On the second pass, he stopped and stared down at the page of words again.

He shook his head. That won't work, he realized. For a moment he had a shot of admiration for the writer's sophistication. Ricky understood he would probably have greeted the "I'm going to kill you" threat with a detachment closing on boredom. After all, he had lived long, and quite well, he thought, so threatening to kill a man in his middle years didn't really amount to much. But that wasn't what he was facing. The threat was more oblique. Someone else was slated to suffer if he did nothing. Someone innocent, and in all likelihood, someone young, because the young are far more vulnerable.

Ricky swallowed hard. I would blame myself and I would live out my remaining time in true agony.

Of that, the writer was absolutely correct.

Or else kill myself. He could taste a sudden bitterness on his tongue. Suicide would be the antithesis of everything he'd stood for, his entire life. He suspected the person who signed his name *Rumplestiltskin* knew that.

He felt abruptly as if he'd been placed on trial.

Again he began to pace around his office, assessing the letter. A great voice within him wanted to be dismissive, to shrug the entire message off, to anoint it an exaggeration and a fantasy without any basis in reality but found that he was unable to. Ricky berated himself: *Just because something makes you uncomfortable, doesn't mean you should ignore it.*

But he didn't really have a good idea how to respond. He stopped pacing and returned to his seat. Madness, he thought. But madness with a distinctly clever touch, because it will cause me to join in the madness.

"I should call the police," he said out loud. Then he stopped. And say what? Dial 911 and tell some dull and unimaginative desk sergeant that he'd received a threatening letter? And listen to the man tell him *So what?* As best as he could tell, no law had been broken. Unless suggesting that

someone kill themselves was a violation of some sort. Extortion? What sort of homicide could it be? he wondered. The idea crossed his mind to call an attorney, but then he understood that the situation posed by Rumpelstiltskin's letter wasn't legal. He had been approached on the playing field that he knew. The game suggested was one of intuitiveness, and psychology; it was about emotions and fears. He shook his head and told himself: I can play in that arena.

"What do you know already?" he spoke to himself in the empty room.

Someone knows my routine. Knows how I let patients into my office. Knows when I break for lunch. What I do on the weekends. Was also clever enough to ferret out a list of relatives. That took some ingenuity.

Knows my birthday.

He breathed in sharply, again. I have been studied.

I did not know it, but someone has been watching me. Measuring me. Someone has devoted considerable time and effort to creating this game and not left me much time for countermoves.

His tongue remained dry and his lips parched. He was suddenly very thirsty, but unwilling to leave the sanctity of his office for the kitchen and a glass of water.

"What did I do to make someone hate me so?" he asked.

This question was like a quick punch in the stomach. Ricky knew he enjoyed the arrogance of many caregivers, thinking that he had delivered good to his small corner of the world through understanding and acceptance of one's existence. The idea that he'd created some monstrous infection of hatred in someone somewhere was extremely unsettling.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the letter. He immediately started to race through the catalog of patients, stretching back over decades, but, just as swiftly, stopped. He understood he might have to do this eventually, but he would need to be systematic, disciplined, dogged, and he wasn't ready to take that step yet.

Ricky didn't think of himself as very qualified to be his own policeman. But then he shook his head, realizing that, in a unique way, that was untrue. For years he'd been a sort of detective. The difference was truly the nature of the crimes he'd investigated and the techniques he'd used. Buttressed slightly by this thought, Ricky Starks sat back down at his desk, reached into the top right-hand drawer and removed an old, leather-bound address book so frayed around the edges that it was held together by a rubber band. For starters, he told himself, we can find the relative who has been contacted by this person. It must be some former patient, he

told himself, one who cut his analysis short and plunged into depression. One who has harbored a near-psychotic fixation for a number of years. He guessed that with a little bit of luck and perhaps a nudge or two in the right direction from whichever of his relatives had been contacted, he would be able to identify the disgruntled ex-patient. He tried to tell himself, empathetically, that the letter writer—Rumplestiltskin—was really reaching out to him for help. Then, almost as quickly, he discarded this wishy-washy thought. Holding the address book in his hand, Ricky thought about the fairy tale character whose name the letter writer had signed. Cruel, he told himself. A magical gnome with a black heart that isn't outfoxed, but loses his contest through sheer bad luck. This observation did not make him feel any better.

The letter seemed to glow on the desktop in front of him.

He nodded slowly. It tells you much, he insisted. Blend the words on the page with what the writer has already done, and you're probably halfway to figuring out who it is.

So, he pushed the letter to the side and opened up the address book, searching for the number for the first person on the list of fifty-two. He grimaced a little and he started to punch the numbers onto the telephone keypad. In the past decade, he had had little contact with any of his relatives, and he suspected none of them would be very eager to hear from him. Especially given the nature of the call.



## Chapter Two

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icky Starks thought himself singularly ill suited at prying information from relatives surprised to hear his voice. He was accustomed to internalizing everything he heard from patients in his office, keeping close reins on all observation and insight. But as he dialed number after number, he found himself in unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. He was incapable of designing a verbal script that he could follow, some standard salutation followed by a brief explanation of why he was calling. Instead, all he could hear was hesitation and indecision in his voice, as he stumbled through hackneyed greetings and tried to extricate an answer to the stupidest question: Has something unusual happened to you?

Consequently, his evening was filled with a series of genuinely irritating telephone conversations. His relatives either were unpleasantly surprised to hear from him, unhappily curious as to why after so much time had passed he would be telephoning out of the blue, busy with some other activity that he was interrupting, or simply rude. There was a brusque quality to each contact, and more than once he was dismissed sharply. There were more than a few terse "What the hell is this all about?" questions, to which he lied that a former patient had somehow managed to obtain a list of his relatives' names and he was concerned that they might be contacted. He left out the possibility that someone might be facing a threat, which, he wondered was probably the biggest lie of all.

It was already approaching ten P.M., which was closing in on his bedtime and he still had more than two dozen names on the list. So far, he