

DEAN
KOONTZ

FEAR
NOTHING

BANTAM BOOKS

new york toronto london

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F E A R
N O T H I N G

ALSO BY DEAN KOONTZ

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

To Robert Gottlieb
for whose vision, genius, dedication,
and friendship I am daily grateful.

We have a weight to carry
and a distance we must go.
We have a weight to carry,
a destination we can't know.
We have a weight to carry
and can put it down nowhere.
We *are* the weight we carry
from there to here to there.

—*The Book of Counted Sorrows*

ONE

THE FIRST TIME

1

On the desk in my candlelit study, the telephone rang, and I knew that a terrible change was coming.

I am not psychic. I do not see signs and portents in the sky. To my eye, the lines in my palm reveal nothing about my future, and I don't have a Gypsy's ability to discern the patterns of fate in wet tea leaves.

My father had been dying for days, however, and after spending the previous night at his bedside, blotting the sweat from his brow and listening to his labored breathing, I knew that he couldn't hold on much longer. I dreaded losing him and being, for the first time in my twenty-eight years, alone.

I am an only son, an only child, and my mother passed away two years ago. Her death had been a shock, but at least she had not been forced to endure a lingering illness.

Last night just before dawn, exhausted, I had returned home to sleep. But I had not slept much or well.

Now I leaned forward in my chair and willed the phone to fall silent, but it would not.

The dog also knew what the ringing meant. He padded out of the shadows into the candleglow, and stared sorrowfully at me.

Unlike others of his kind, he will hold any man's or woman's gaze as long as he is interested. Animals usually stare directly at us only briefly—then look away as though unnerved by something they see in human

eyes. Perhaps Orson sees what other dogs see, and perhaps he, too, is disturbed by it, but he is not intimidated.

He is a strange dog. But he is my dog, my steadfast friend, and I love him.

On the seventh ring, I surrendered to the inevitable and answered the phone.

The caller was a nurse at Mercy Hospital. I spoke to her without looking away from Orson.

My father was quickly fading. The nurse suggested that I come to his bedside without delay.

As I put down the phone, Orson approached my chair and rested his burly black head in my lap. He whimpered softly and nuzzled my hand. He did not wag his tail.

For a moment I was numb, unable to think or act. The silence of the house, as deep as water in an oceanic abyss, was a crushing, immobilizing pressure. Then I phoned Sasha Goodall to ask her to drive me to the hospital.

Usually she slept from noon until eight o'clock. She spun music in the dark, from midnight until six o'clock in the morning, on KBAY, the only radio station in Moonlight Bay. At a few minutes past five on this March evening, she was most likely sleeping, and I regretted the need to wake her.

Like sad-eyed Orson, however, Sasha was my friend, to whom I could always turn. And she was a far better driver than the dog.

She answered on the second ring, with no trace of sleepiness in her voice. Before I could tell her what had happened, she said, "Chris, I'm so sorry," as though she had been waiting for this call and as if in the ringing of her phone she had heard the same ominous note that Orson and I had heard in mine.

I bit my lip and refused to consider what was coming. As long as Dad was alive, hope remained that his doctors were wrong. Even at the eleventh hour, the cancer might go into remission.

I believe in the possibility of miracles.

After all, in spite of my condition, I have lived more than twenty-eight years, which is a miracle of sorts—although some other people, seeing my life from outside, might think it a curse.

I believe in the possibility of miracles, but more to the point, I believe in our *need* for them.

"I'll be there in five minutes," Sasha promised.

At night I could walk to the hospital, but at this hour I would be too much of a spectacle and in too great a danger if I tried to make the trip on foot.

“No,” I said. “Drive carefully. I’ll probably take ten minutes or more to get ready.”

“Love you, Snowman.”

“Love you,” I replied.

I replaced the cap on the pen with which I had been writing when the call had come from the hospital, and I put it aside with the yellow legal-size tablet.

Using a long-handled brass snuffer, I extinguished the three fat candles. Thin, sinuous ghosts of smoke writhed in the shadows.

Now, an hour before twilight, the sun was low in the sky but still dangerous. It glimmered threateningly at the edges of the pleated shades that covered all the windows.

Anticipating my intentions, as usual, Orson was already out of the room, padding across the upstairs hall.

He is a ninety-pound Labrador mix, as black as a witch’s cat. Through the layered shadows of our house, he roams all but invisibly, his presence betrayed only by the thump of his big paws on the area rugs and by the click of his claws on the hardwood floors.

In my bedroom, across the hall from the study, I didn’t bother to switch on the dimmer-controlled, frosted-glass ceiling fixture. The indirect, sour-yellow light of the westering sun, pressing at the edges of the window shades, was sufficient for me.

My eyes are better adapted to gloom than are those of most people. Although I am, figuratively speaking, a brother to the owl, I don’t have a special gift of nocturnal sight, nothing as romantic or as thrilling as a paranormal talent. Simply this: Lifelong habituation to darkness has sharpened my night vision.

Orson leaped onto the footstool and then curled on the armchair to watch me as I girded myself for the sunlit world.

From a pullman drawer in the adjoining bathroom, I withdrew a squeeze bottle of lotion that included a sunscreen with a rating of fifty. I applied it generously to my face, ears, and neck.

The lotion had a faint coconut scent, an aroma that I associate with palm trees in sunshine, tropical skies, ocean vistas spangled with noon-time light, and other things that will be forever beyond my experience. This, for me, is the fragrance of desire and denial and hopeless yearning, the succulent perfume of the unattainable.

Sometimes I dream that I am walking on a Caribbean beach in a rain of sunshine, and the white sand under my feet seems to be a cushion of pure radiance. The warmth of the sun on my skin is more erotic than a lover’s touch. In the dream, I am not merely bathed in the light but pierced by it. When I wake, I am bereft.

Now the lotion, although smelling of the tropical sun, was cool on my face and neck. I also worked it into my hands and wrists.

The bathroom featured a single window at which the shade was currently raised, but the space remained meagerly illuminated because the glass was frosted and because the incoming sunlight was filtered through the graceful limbs of a metrosideros. The silhouettes of leaves fluttered on the pane.

In the mirror above the sink, my reflection was little more than a shadow. Even if I switched on the light, I would not have had a clear look at myself, because the single bulb in the overhead fixture was of low wattage and had a peach tint.

Only rarely have I seen my face in full light.

Sasha says that I remind her of James Dean, more as he was in *East of Eden* than in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

I myself don't perceive the resemblance. The hair is the same, yes, and the pale blue eyes. But he looked so wounded, and I do not see myself that way.

I am not James Dean. I am no one but me, Christopher Snow, and I can live with that.

Finished with the lotion, I returned to the bedroom. Orson raised his head from the armchair to savor the coconut scent.

I was already wearing athletic socks, Nikes, blue jeans, and a black T-shirt. I quickly pulled on a black denim shirt with long sleeves and buttoned it at the neck.

Orson trailed me downstairs to the foyer. Because the porch was deep with a low ceiling, and because two massive California live oaks stood in the yard, no direct sun could reach the sidelights flanking the front door; consequently, they were not covered with curtains or blinds. The leaded panes—geometric mosaics of clear, green, red, and amber glass—glowed softly like jewels.

I took a zippered, black leather jacket from the coat closet. I would be out after dark, and even following a mild March day, the central coast of California can turn chilly when the sun goes down.

From the closet shelf, I snatched a navy-blue, billed cap and pulled it on, tugging it low on my head. Across the front, above the visor, in ruby-red embroidered letters, were the words *Mystery Train*.

One night during the previous autumn, I had found the cap in Fort Wyvern, the abandoned military base inland from Moonlight Bay. It had been the only object in a cool, dry, concrete-walled room three stories underground.

Although I had no idea to what the embroidered words might refer, I had kept the cap because it intrigued me.

As I turned toward the front door, Orson whined beseechingly.

I stooped and petted him. "I'm sure Dad would like to see you one last time, fella. I know he would. But there's no place for you in a hospital."

His direct, coal-black eyes glimmered. I could have sworn that his gaze brimmed with grief and sympathy. Maybe that was because I was looking at him through repressed tears of my own.

My friend Bobby Halloway says that I tend to anthropomorphize animals, ascribing to them human attributes and attitudes which they do not, in fact, possess.

Perhaps this is because animals, unlike some people, have always accepted me for what I am. The four-legged citizens of Moonlight Bay seem to possess a more complex understanding of life—as well as more kindness—than at least some of my neighbors.

Bobby tells me that anthropomorphizing animals, regardless of my experiences with them, is a sign of immaturity. I tell Bobby to go copulate with himself.

I comforted Orson, stroking his glossy coat and scratching behind his ears. He was curiously tense. Twice he cocked his head to listen intently to sounds I could not hear—as if he sensed a threat looming, something even worse than the loss of my father.

At that time, I had not yet seen anything suspicious about Dad's impending death. Cancer was only fate, not murder—unless you wanted to try bringing criminal charges against God.

That I had lost both parents within two years, that my mother had died when she was only fifty-two, that my father was only fifty-six as he lay on his deathbed . . . well, all this just seemed to be my poor luck—which had been with me, literally, since my conception.

Later, I would have reason to recall Orson's tension—and good reason to wonder if he had sensed the tidal wave of trouble washing toward us.

Bobby Halloway would surely sneer at this and say that I am doing worse than anthropomorphizing the mutt, that now I am ascribing *super*-human attributes to him. I would have to agree—and then tell Bobby to go copulate *vigorously* with himself.

Anyway, I petted and scratched and generally comforted Orson until a horn sounded in the street and then, almost at once, sounded again in the driveway.

Sasha had arrived.

In spite of the sunscreen on my neck, I turned up the collar of my jacket for additional protection.

From the Stickley-style foyer table under a print of Maxfield Parrish's *Daybreak*, I grabbed a pair of wraparound sunglasses.

With my hand on the hammered-copper doorknob, I turned to Orson once more. "We'll be all right."

In fact, I didn't know quite how we could go on without my father. He was our link to the world of light and to the people of the day.

More than that, he loved me as no one left on earth could love me, as only a parent could love a damaged child. He understood me as perhaps no one would ever understand me again.

"We'll be all right," I repeated.

The dog regarded me solemnly and chuffed once, almost pityingly, as if he knew that I was lying.

I opened the front door, and as I went outside, I put on the wrap-around sunglasses. The special lenses were totally UV-proof.

My eyes are my point of greatest vulnerability. I can take no risk whatsoever with them.

Sasha's green Ford Explorer was in the driveway, with the engine running, and she was behind the wheel.

I closed the house door and locked it. Orson had made no attempt to slip out at my heels.

A breeze had sprung up from the west: an onshore flow with the faint, astringent scent of the sea. The leaves of the oaks whispered as if transmitting secrets branch to branch.

My chest grew so tight that my lungs felt constricted, as was always the case when I was required to venture outside in daylight. This symptom was entirely psychological but nonetheless affecting.

Going down the porch steps and along the flagstone walk to the driveway, I felt weighed down. Perhaps this was how a deep-sea diver might feel in a pressure suit with a kingdom of water overhead.

2

When I got into the Explorer, Sasha Goodall said quietly, “Hey, Snowman.”

“Hey.”

I buckled my safety harness as Sasha shifted into reverse.

From under the bill of my cap, I peered at the house as we backed away from it, wondering how it would appear to me when next I saw it. I felt that when my father left this world, all of the things that had belonged to him would look shabbier and diminished because they would no longer be touched by his spirit.

It is a Craftsman-period structure, in the Greene and Greene tradition: ledger stone set with a minimum of mortar, cedar siding silvered by weather and time, entirely modern in its lines but not in the least artificial or insubstantial, fully of the earth and formidable. After the recent winter rains, the crisp lines of the slate roof were softened by a green coverlet of lichen.

As we reversed into the street, I thought that I saw the shade nudged aside at one of the living-room windows, at the back of the deep porch, and Orson’s face at the pane, his paws on the sill.

As she drove away from the house, Sasha said, “How long since you’ve been out in this?”

“Daylight? A little over nine years.”

“A novena to the darkness.”

She was also a songwriter.

I said, "Damn it, Goodall, don't wax poetic on me."

"What happened nine years ago?"

"Appendicitis."

"Ah. That time when you almost died."

"Only death brings me out in daylight."

She said, "At least you got a sexy scar from it."

"You think so?"

"I like to kiss it, don't I?"

"I've wondered about that."

"Actually, it scares me, that scar," she said. "You might have died."

"Didn't."

"I kiss it like I'm saying a little prayer of thanks. That you're here with me."

"Or maybe you're sexually aroused by deformity."

"Asshole."

"Your mother never taught you language like that."

"It was the nuns in parochial school."

I said, "You know what I like?"

"We've been together almost two years. Yeah, I think I know what you like."

"I like that you never cut me any slack."

"Why should I?" she asked.

"Exactly."

Even in my armor of cloth and lotion, behind the shades that shielded my sensitive eyes from ultraviolet rays, I was unnerved by the day around and above me. I felt eggshell-fragile in its vise grip.

Sasha was aware of my uneasiness but pretended not to notice. To take my mind off both the threat and the boundless beauty of the sunlit world, she did what she does so well—which is be Sasha.

"Where will you be later?" she asked. "When it's over."

"If it's over. They could be wrong."

"Where will you be when I'm on the air?"

"After midnight . . . probably Bobby's place."

"Make sure he turns on his radio."

"Are you taking requests tonight?" I asked.

"You don't have to call in. I'll know what you need."

At the next corner, she swung the Explorer right, onto Ocean Avenue. She drove uphill, away from the sea.

Fronting the shops and restaurants beyond the deep sidewalks, eighty-foot stone pines spread wings of branches across the street. The pavement was feathered with shadow and sunshine.