

DEAN R. KOONTZ



COLD FIRE

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Dean R. Koontz  
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# COLD FIRE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*New York*

*This is a work of fiction. The characters and events described in this book are imaginary and resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.*

G. P. Putnam's Sons  
*Publishers Since 1838*  
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# COLD FIRE

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*Also by Dean R. Koontz*



THE BAD PLACE

THE SERVANTS OF TWILIGHT

MIDNIGHT

LIGHTNING

WATCHERS

STRANGERS

TWILIGHT EYES

DARKFALL

PHANTOMS

WHISPERS

THE MASK

THE VISION

THE FACE OF FEAR

NIGHT CHILLS

SHATTERED



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To Nick and Vicky Page,  
who know how to be  
good neighbors and friends  
—if they would only *try*.

&

Dick and Pat Karlan,  
who are among the few  
in “Hollywood”  
who own their souls  
—and always will.

My life is better for  
having known you all.  
Weirder, but better!



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▲

Part One

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▼

THE HERO,  
THE FRIEND

*In the real world  
as in dreams,  
nothing is quite  
what it seems.*

—THE BOOK OF COUNTED SORROWS

▲

*Life without meaning  
cannot be borne.  
We find a mission  
to which we're sworn  
—or answer the call  
of Death's dark horn.  
Without a gleanings  
of purpose in life,  
we have no vision,  
we live in strife,  
—or let blood fall  
on a suicide knife.*

—THE BOOK OF COUNTED SORROWS



## AUGUST 12

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# 1

Even before the events in the supermarket, Jim Ironheart should have known trouble was coming. During the night he dreamed of being pursued across a field by a flock of large blackbirds that shrieked around him in a turbulent flapping of wings and tore at him with hooked beaks as precision-honed as surgical scalpels. When he woke and was unable to breathe, he shuffled onto the balcony in his pajama bottoms to get some fresh air. But at nine-thirty in the morning, the temperature, already ninety degrees, only contributed to the sense of suffocation with which he had awakened.

A long shower and a shave refreshed him.

The refrigerator contained only part of a moldering Sara Lee cake. It resembled a laboratory culture of some new, exquisitely virulent strain of botulinus. He could either starve or go out into the furnace heat.

The August day was so torrid that birds, beyond the boundaries of bad dreams, preferred the bowers of the trees to the sun-scorched open spaces of the southern California sky; they sat silently in their leafy shelters, chirruping rarely and without enthusiasm. Dogs padded cat-quick along sidewalks as hot as griddles. No man, woman or child paused to see if an egg would fry on the concrete, taking it as a matter of faith.

After eating a light breakfast at an umbrella-shaded table on the patio of a seaside cafe in Laguna Beach, he was enervated again and sheathed in a dew of perspiration. It was one of those rare occasions when the Pacific could not produce even a dependable mild breeze.

From there he went to the supermarket, which at first seemed to be a sanctuary. He was wearing only white cotton slacks and a blue T-shirt, so the air-conditioning and the chill currents rising off the refrigerated display cases were refreshing.

He was in the cookie department, comparing the ingredients in fudge macaroons to those in pineapple-coconut-almond bars, trying to decide which was the lesser dietary sin, when the fit hit him. On the scale of such things, it was not much of a fit—no convulsions, no violent muscle contractions, no sudden rivers of sweat, no speaking in strange tongues. He just abruptly turned to a woman shopper next to him and said, “Life line.”

She was about thirty, wearing shorts and a halter top, good-looking enough to have experienced a wearying array of come-ons from men, so perhaps she thought he was making a pass at her. She gave him a guarded look. “Excuse me?”

Flow with it, he told himself. Don’t be afraid.

He began to shudder, not because of the air-conditioning but because a series of *inner* chills swam through him, like a wriggling school of eels. All the strength went out of his hands, and he dropped the packages of cookies.

Embarrassed but unable to control himself, he repeated: “Life line.”

“I don’t understand,” the woman said.

Although this had happened to him nine times before, he said, “Neither do I.”

She clutched a box of vanilla wafers as though she might throw it in his face and run if she decided he was a walking headline (BERSERK MAN SHOOTS SIX IN SUPERMARKET). Nevertheless, she was enough of a good Samaritan to hang in for another exchange: “Are you all right?”

No doubt, he was pale. He felt as if all the blood had drained out of his face. He tried to put on a reassuring smile, knew it was a ghastly grimace, and said, “Gotta go.”

Turning away from his shopping cart, Jim walked out of the market, into the searing August heat. The forty-degree temperature change momentarily locked the breath in his lungs. The blacktop in the parking lot was tacky in places. Sun silvered the windshields of the cars and seemed to shatter into dazzling splinters against chrome bumpers and grilles.

He went to his Ford. It had air-conditioning, but even after he

had driven across the lot and turned onto Crown Valley Parkway, the draft from the dashboard vents was refreshing only by comparison with the baking-oven atmosphere in the car. He put down his window.

Initially he did not know where he was going. Then he had a vague feeling that he should return home. Rapidly the feeling became a strong hunch, the hunch became a conviction, and the conviction became a compulsion. He absolutely *had* to get home.

He drove too fast, weaving in and out of traffic, taking chances, which was uncharacteristic of him. If a cop had stopped him, he would not have been able to explain his desperate urgency, for he did not understand it himself.

It was as if his every move was orchestrated by someone unseen, controlling him much the way that he controlled the car.

Again he told himself to flow with it, which was easy since he had no choice. He also told himself not to be afraid, but fear was his unshakable companion.

When he pulled into his driveway in Laguna Niguel, the spiky black shadows of palm fronds looked like cracks in the blazing-white stucco walls of his small house, as if the structure had dried out and split open in the heat. The red-tile roof appeared to ripple like overlapping waves of flame.

In his bedroom, sunlight acquired a coppery hue as it poured through the tinted windows. It laid a penny-colored glow in stripes across the bed and off-white carpet, alternating with bands of shade from the half-open plantation shutters.

Jim switched on a bedside lamp.

He didn't know he was going to pack for travel until he found himself taking a suitcase from his closet. He gathered up his shaving gear and toiletries first. He didn't know his destination or how long he would be gone, but he included two changes of clothes. These jobs—adventures, missions, whatever in God's name they were—usually didn't require him to be away more than two or three days.

He hesitated, worried that he had not packed enough. But these trips were dangerous; each could be his last, in which case it didn't matter whether he packed too much or too little.

He closed the suitcase and stared at it, not sure what to do next. Then he said, "Gotta fly," and he knew.

The drive to John Wayne Airport, on the southeastern edge of



Santa Ana, took less than half an hour. Along the way he saw subtle reminders that southern California had been a desert before the importation of water through aqueducts. A billboard urged water conservation. Gardeners were installing low-maintenance cactus and ice plant in front of a new Southwestern-style apartment building. Between the greenbelts and the neighborhoods of lushly landscaped properties, the vegetation on undeveloped fields and hills was parched and brown, waiting for the kiss of a match in the trembling hand of one of the pyromaniacs contributing to the annual, devastating wildfire season.

In the main terminal at the airport, travelers streamed to and from the boarding gates. The multi-racial crowd belied the lingering myth that Orange County was culturally bland and populated solely by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. On his way to the bank of TV monitors that displayed a list of arriving and departing PSA flights, Jim heard four languages besides English.

He read the destinations from top to bottom on the monitor. The next to last city—Portland, Oregon—struck a spark of inspiration in him, and he went straight to the ticket counter.

The clerk who served him was a clean-cut young man, as straight-arrow as a Disneyland employee—at first glance.

“The flight to Portland leaving in twenty minutes,” Jim said. “Is it full up?”

The clerk checked the computer. “You’re in luck, sir. We have three open seats.”

While the clerk processed the credit card and issued the ticket, Jim noticed the guy had pierced ears. He wasn’t wearing earrings on the job, but the holes in his lobes were visible enough to indicate that he wore them regularly when he was off duty and that he preferred heavy jewelry. When he returned Jim’s credit card, his shirtsleeve pulled up far enough on his right wrist to reveal the snarling muzzle of what appeared to be a lavishly detailed, colorful dragon tattoo that extended up his entire arm. The knuckles of that hand were crusted with scabs, as if they had been skinned in a fight.

All the way to the boarding gate, Jim wondered what subculture the clerk swam in after he shed his uniform at the end of the work day and put on street clothes. He had a hunch the guy was nothing as mundane as a biker punk.